

I'd Rather Take a Bullet for You (Than See You Hurt Again)

by randombitsofstars

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Summary: Arthur's been taking odd jobs after the events of the inception, trying to distance himself from the team. It's just a coincidence that Arthur's in London, where Eames is, when these jobs get him into trouble. Arthur is the point man, he's supposed to know these things. What Arthur wasn't expecting was Eames' mother to be there as well.

1. Chapter 1 - When the Job Goes Wrong

Chapter 1: When the Job Goes Wrong

Arthur is very precise. He has to be, he's the point man. In fact, one of the most well reputed point men in the dreamsharing world, both legal and not, and for a very good reason. Arthur knows everything. He makes sure of it.

After the Fischer inception took place, Arthur tried to distance himself from anyone on the team for a while. Arthur had to let go of his iron-tight hold on the facts, and give some work to the new team members around him. Arthur hated it, but there was nothing else he could do. Besides putting the original team in danger by subjecting them to another mission, they weren't even interested in another job at the moment.

Cobb was too busy fawning over his children to work in dreamsharing, and Ariadne was again wrapped up in university life. Yusuf had vanished into the wind, and Eamesâ€¦ well, Arthur knew exactly where Eames was. He justified to himself that Eames was a great professional to work with, and that's why Arthur knew that at this _exact _moment Eames was in London getting shitfaced at some hole-in-the-wall bar. _Just a professional curiosity_, Arthur reasoned. That one little heated encounter the night after the inception where they both got a little too buzzed and ended up telling secrets like sixteen year olds at a sleepover just didn't count. They were both former military; of course they had plenty of

war stories and gossip. It meant nothing that Arthur had never gossiped with a colleague before. Absolutely nothing.

So coincidentally Arthur found himself in London as well. And, for the first time in a long time, Arthur was deigning to work with a slightly shifty team. The extractor, Sandy, wouldn't make direct eye contact with anyone â€“ and looked a little too much like that serial killer who had never been convicted in the States. Hans looked more like a club bouncer than an architect, but Arthur found his work passable. The fact that Hans' projections looked more like former Navy SEALS than normal people was something Arthur was willing to overlook. The chemist, Ray, was a man of Moroccan descent who spoke seven languages, though none of them being English. However, again Arthur had vetted him, so when Ray stood against the scrutiny Arthur allowed him on the team. Finally, the forger, Emilia, was a soft spoken Spaniard who was so good at blending in with her surroundings Arthur was surprised she didn't just melt into the wall. Emilia was so different than Eames' loud, flirtatious way of scoping out the mark, that Arthur found himself once again discomfited. Why should I care if she's different from Eames? Arthur thought. It's not like Eames is the gold standard. The problem is, in Arthur's mind, for some inexplicable reason, suddenly Eames was.

The job was easy. A simple extraction. Get into an investment banker's head, find the passwords to her stock portfolio, and then get out.

The son, named Colin, was paying for the job. He was an average guy, by all accounts. He just happened to have information that the medical stock in a certain pharmaceutical drug, owned almost completely by his mother, Eva Jansen, was about to go up in value 400%. He was paying them all in cash, half before the job and half after. Arthur would've questioned the son more in depth about his motives, but he promised Sandy that he would let her handle the son's profile. Arthur felt unsettled by that, but he was so busy planning out the actual job that he couldn't argue too much.

They had a small window for the job, but the setting was ideal. Eva Jansen was temporarily working at a lowered security banking area, because the last one had been flooded by a particularly harsh rainstorm. Arthur could almost hear Eames saying, a bank in London not prepared for a little rain? Disgraceful, darling. In any case, Arthur was happy about this turn of events, as was the rest of the team. With his usual attire and attitude, Arthur found that it was laughably easy to case the building, chat up the employees, and find a place to set up camp during the job. Ray would lure the mark into an abandoned private meeting room, and the plan would be set into action.

If Arthur expected any problems with the London job, it wasn't the job itself, rather the co-workers he chose to surround himself with. He hated giving up some responsibility to other members of the team, but even Arthur had to concede he couldn't do everything.

During the test runs that Arthur oversaw, Hans' reconstruction of London was surprisingly accurate. "For a man with a German accent, you sure know London," Sandy had muttered. For his part, Arthur made sure everything had been organized to the second, and waited patiently for their mark to simply waltz in the meeting room with Ray. Sandy and Hans waited impatiently in the corner beside him,

while Emilia practiced the facial expressions of the son one last time. She would be distracting Eva by "taking her mother out to lunch" while the whole process of finding the passwords went down.

Ray, minutes later, successfully lured Eva into the room, with promises of growth charts and progress report sheets that had somehow failed to make it to the right floor of the banker's work that day. It helped that Ray spoke Dutch, Eva's native language. She had been "helplessly charmed" according to Ray (Ray bragged in fluent French to Arthur as they shot her up with the sedative).

Everyone flew into action. The door was closed. Ray handled the drugs, getting everyone set up in their respective chairs. Arthur, still disgruntled, had reluctantly agreed to be put under as well. Ray had argued (in German this time, to Hans' relief) that he had extensive training in both hand to hand combat and firearms situations, having been in some obscure resistance group or another in Africa. Plus, Ray stated to Sandy (this time in Italian) that this job had little to no risk in the real world, seeing as how no one blinked if the banker took "a sick day" (Arthur's skills hacking through the company's firewall took care of that record).

The last thing Arthur saw before shutting his eyes was Ray's curly black hair above him. He was making some kind of gesture and saying something in Turkish. Arthur does not speak any Turkish.

The second they were in the dreamscape, Emilia waved nervously, now looking the part of the son, and bolted off into the crowd to find Eva.

But as soon as Arthur entered the dreamscape, something felt off to him. As the rest of the group began to walk through Hans' London, it looked a shade too much like Eastern European architecture. Eva's projections looked even more hostile than Hans' had been in the test runs (and Arthur hadn't thought that was completely possible up until now). His pressed shirt suddenly felt a size too small under his suit jacket, and his coiffed hair was shaken in a breeze that hadn't been there during the test runs. Looking over at his partners, Hans and Sandy looked similarly uneasy. Hans was running his obscenely large hands through his thick blond hair, his muscles straining through the military issue t-shirt. Sandy was sending a fierce death glare into the ground, and her Fall Out Boy hoodie was looking more ratty than normal. "Somezing iz not richtig, Arthur." Hans' blue eyes looked worriedly into Arthur's own, more emotion showing on his tan face than Arthur had ever seen. "It feels like ze day Bayern lost to MÃ¶nchengladbach, and that was not a gut day."

Arthur looked back to him levelly as the three continued their trek into the heart of the city. "I don't watch football," Arthur stated, his hand instinctively lying on the holster for his Glock. "But I tend to agree with you, Hans. Something is off. Stay alert." Once in the main square area, they approached the conspicuous looking building ahead of them, obviously the place where Eva's subconscious was storing its info. As they drew closer, Arthur was the first to realize what the structure was. Of course Eva would pick a bank as the secret keeper for her passwords, Arthur thought. So predictable.

"Let's just finish the job," Sandy stated, her fingers twisting in

the black strings of her hoodie. "The son confirmed she's definitely not militarized, she doesn't even know about the dreamsharing world."

Arthur did not like how Sandy had taken the son's word at face value, and silently berated himself for letting Sandy handle any of the preparations._I need my old team back_, Arthur thought bitterly.

"Tell me again vhy the de son has an American accent while ze mother does not?" Hans asked, opening the door to the imposing bank.

Arthur took flank, ushering in Sandy and Hans ahead of him, keeping a solid grip on the large glass doors. "He studied abroad in the U.S. and decided to stay there," Arthur replied, reflexively straightening his tie once the bank's door closed behind them. He hated feeling the scrutiny of people. He liked be the observer, not the observed. Something still wasn't right.

"The projections are still paying too much attention to us, Sandy," Arthur said quietly, his hand straying back to the familiar outline of his Glock.

"We're _fine_, Arthur, stop micromanaging. I did my research. Hans, go chat up the lady at the reception desk. Arthur, I'll go crack the safe in the back while you stay on watch, _like we talked about_, unless you want to abort?" Sandy tone conveyed that if Arthur wanted to stop the operation, he was going to have to dispatch her if he wanted to leave the meeting room unscathed.

Arthur again thought of Eames, and how he said sometimes fake acquiescence was better than starting a fight with teammates.

"Fine." Arthur stated, already moving smoothly towards the entrance. His mind began to formulate exit strategies and options for cover under gunfire. Hans put on his best _I am a lost attractive tourist help me_ face and began moving toward the receptionist. Arthur couldn't believe it worked, but with that chest and arms, Hans got most things that he wanted, good actor or not.

Sandy, looking out of place in her casual attire, slipped off her hoodie (and threw it into one of the potted plants) to reveal a no-nonsense black blazer and black pencil skirt. _She likes black an awful lot,_ Arthur thought. _Needs a wardrobe upgrade._

Sandy disappeared around the corner, heading towards the safe visible at the end of the hallway. It wasn't an imposing one, just as Arthur had expected. _The mark is not aware, we're okay,_ Arthur reassured himself as he took a calculated seat near the entrance._Why aren't you trusting your gut, dear Arthur?_ Eames' voice seemed to whisper in Arthur's ear, causing him to tense up. He was sweating. Arthur looked at Hans. Sweat was beading on his forearms as well. _Not good,_ Arthur thought. _Change in temperature almost always means a change in the mark's subconscious. _Arthur wished Eames had been their forger.

"How are you doing, Emilia?" The whole team had earpieces, only to be used under emergencies. But, damn it, Arthur was feeling emergency-like at the moment.

Emilia's comms crackled to life. "Arthur?" Her voice, even quieter than normal, whispered through the speaker.

"Ez everything _gut_, Emilia?" This time Hans was talking from his place across the room.

"No, Hans, no. Eva was suspicious of me. Apparently I was acting 'too nice'! She thought I was trying to con her or something. I'm hiding in an alley right now. The projections were studying me too intently."

Fuck. Arthur swore to himself silently. He knew Emilia hadn't been studying the son's mannerisms enough. But her projection of him was so convincing that the rest of the team had outvoted Arthur, saying they were ready for the operation. "It's alright, Emilia. Just tell us where was Eva heading?" Arthur found himself trying to reassure Emilia, if only to get information out of her.

"Um, she was going towards the center of town. That one building. I think it was a bank or something?"

Arthur heard Hans swear in German across the room, right before he noticed the receptionist projection pulling something out from under the counter. Arthur shut off the comms with one hand while upholstering his Glock with the other. Arthur walked briskly across the room, shedding his suit jacket, just in time to see the receptionist bringing out a sub-machine gun, and heading towards where Sandy was trying to crack the safe._What the fuck?_

Arthur lined up his Glock and shot the receptionist point blank in the side of the head. Blood splattered across his red tie and silky vest, his suit jacket abandoned on the chair behind him. "_Danke_, Arthur! Nice shot! I was a little busy!" Hans kicked away suddenly the mountain of projections who had slid upon him, sliding out what looked like three pistols from the depths of his cargo pants, just as more projections tried to crash through him to the safe area.

Eva was militarized. There was no other explanation. Arthur parried a roundhouse kick from one female projection in a red dress while shooting another in the leg. Hans stabbed one 60 year-old rabid older lady with his combat knife, while head butting another away.

Sandy already had at least ten minutes with the safe. They had less than a half hour left in the dream, regardless. "Sandy!" Arthur called, strangling a man by his pinstripe tie. "Are you almost done?"

"It's a Gardall! A bit better than we were expecting!" Arthur felt his stomach drop out from under him, or maybe it was the puncture wound from the stapler that had been jabbed into his side. They had been set up by someone.

Arthur pistol-whipped another banker in his haste to get to Hans, breaking another projection's leg with his foot as he went. "Hans, have you noticed the projections are more interested in getting past us than killing us?" Arthur pulled a stout man in a blue suit off of Hans' leg. He silenced the man's scrabbling fingers by breaking the delicate bones of his hand with a well-placed smack from his Glock.

"_Nein_, Arthur, what are you talking about?" Hans had to shout to be heard as he pulled another gun from his side, this time a Smith and Wesson revolver.

"They want Sandy, not us." The moment Arthur said the realization, he knew it was true. "Eva's not militarized â€“ not in the normal way, Hans. Her projections aren't great fighters. But â€“ but they want Sandy. They _know_ Sandy."

Hans opened his mouth to reply. But then the short man Arthur had pulled off Hans' leg whipped out a pistol with his uninjured hand. He aimed shakily and shot Hans, right in the side of the head.

A/N: Reviews are very much appreciated! My tumblr is the same as my username.

2. Chapter 2 - Ripped to Pieces

Chapter 2: Ripped to Pieces

Arthur's military experience had trained him to act efficiently, especially in a crisis. So when Hans was shot by the projection, Arthur was already there, killing the shooter with a well-placed shot from his Glock. Arthur paused, taking stock of the situation. His arm was in agonizing pain where it had been twisted back by a feral projection, and his side stung where he had been impaled by the stapler. Arthur could feel bruises forming across the side of his body, and wished he had time to rip off his suit vest. Mechanically Arthur aimed into the crowd, throwing out the original plan of stealth. All he cared about now was keeping the projections away from the back hallway where Sandy was working.

As Arthur moved, he realized he was covered in blood. _Good thing this isn't real life, or I'd have to throw out another suit_.

He was on the lookout for a rabid Eva, since that seemed to be what all of this was coming down to. One thought kept reoccurring through his mind, in time with the throbbing of his left wrist (which was probably broken) - _I wish Eames was here to back me up._ Suddenly his obnoxiously inappropriate humor seemed to be missing from an altogether bleak picture.

Like some kind of dam that had been broken, Hans' shooting had set the projections into an even higher pitched frenzy. Before, Hans and Arthur had been successfully repelling the projections from reaching the safe, but now the team was one man down. Arthur had no back up.

The projections trampled over the inert body of Hans, determined to reach Sandy. Arthur chased after them, checking for Hans' pulse along the way. Miraculously, there was a faint rapid fluttering. Against Arthur's original thoughts, the bullet hadn't killed Hans instantly. Arthur remembered something he had learned in military dreamsharing â€“ a penetrating head injury places almost instantaneous death at 92%. That is to say, although it was rare, sometimes the enemy could live, albeit temporarily. _Hans is the 8% - Sandy might still have time._

I have to stall for progress with the safe, Arthur thought grimly, and raised his Glock once again. The mob of projections, which was twenty plus people pouring in at all entrances, rushed towards the back of the bank. Arthur dispatched as many as he could, kicking, punching, shooting, and turned on his comms, trying to warn Sandy before they were all pushed out of the dream. "Sandy! Projections coming your way! Sandy!"

Arthur thought he could hear faint yelling down the hallway, but it seemed more remote than it had earlier. For some reason Sandy didn't have her comms active, or had lost them. Sandy didn't tell us something. This is completely wrong. The projections should care about Hans and I. He's the dreamer, and I'm an accomplice. Never mind the safe; they should try to kill us too!

As Arthur turned to the corner, blood spattered onto his face from another dispatched projection (Infinite bullets, darling, it's the best, Eames had once remarked). After making the corner, Arthur realized why Sandy's voice had seemed so much farther away than before â€“ because it was. In Hans' last lucid moments, he must have thought of more architecture leading to the safe. Like a scene out of Harry Potter, infinite staircases, these being completely mirrored, twisted in all directions, confusing the most adept militarized mind.

Another projection slammed into Arthur as he took in Hans' final masterpiece. Arthur was hit hard enough he was knocked to his knees, his Glock sliding across the marble and onto one of the moving staircases. Arthur got into a defensive position, prepared for hand-to-hand combat. To his astonishment, he realized a slim hand was being held out to his aid. What kind of projection offers help to an enemy dreamer?

Arthur's eyes trailed up the slim shaking hand, to a pale arm dotted with freckles, and then to a heart-shaped face, creased with age and framed by a mess of brown waves. Finally, Arthur met panicked hazel eyes. With a start, he realized who it was. Arthur was looking into the face of Eva Jansen.

In the space of a second, Arthur's mind flashed through a sequence of thoughts. It must be some kind of trick. Why would she help me? Arthur was dumbfounded. Here, the target, in the dreamscape, was offering her help to the person employed to steal her secrets. Let's see where this goes, Arthur thought. Offering his best beguiling smile (once again wishing Eames was there to deliver his over-the-top charm), Arthur took her hand and stood up.

Aware of the time being wasted by this encounter, Arthur opened his mouth to cut to the chase. Eva beat him to it.

"Oh my god, you look familiar, you work with me at CurrencyCorp, correct? Do you have any idea what's going on? Wow, you're in rough shape. Who hurt you? Was it my son? There's blood everywhere and my son tried to distract me from coming to work and I'm panicking and—" Arthur cut off Eva's lilting accent the second he realized what was going on.

"Yes, Eva Jansen? My name's Eames. I've heard so much about your work! I'm a temporary intern here, I came to work, and all this happened. There's a safe a woman is trying to move to protect from

these people, do you know about that?" Arthur did his best to seem like a scared, star struck intern, using the first name that popped into his head. Eva's subconscious seemed to remember Arthur when he cased her building, and for some reason Eva now associated him as a friend. I can work with this, Arthur thought, discreetly adjusting his arm so his empty gun holster was hidden.

"A safe?" Eva's eyes alighted with recognition. "There's â€“ there's something important there, I know thatâ€œ! I don't know whyâ€œ! you said there's a woman trying to save it from this?"

"Yes, and we have to go help her," Arthur smoothly replied. They had already wasted time with the introductions. I've never worked with my own mark beforeâ€œ! but I guess there's a first for everything._

Arthur took a hold of one of Eva's arms, gently pulling her behind him. Eva seemed to be intently focused on Arthur's face, for some reason. I can work with this. Arthur preformed a complicated maneuver as they climbed onto one of the moving stairways, grabbing his Glock and sliding it out of Eva's sight, simultaneously propelling her in front of him.

Arthur knew from working on cases with Cobb that 'infinite staircases' really have the right-hand rule that applies to mazes. That is, to get through the constantly moving staircases, a person has to always take the path to the right. Eva blindly followed as Arthur hopped from staircase to staircase, always taking the right hand path when offered. What would Eames think of me now? Hopping like a bunny through a maze of mirrors, during a fucked up operation, with the same person I'm trying to target in tow? Arthur shook himself, trying to focus on the projections coming into sight. Why do I care what Eames thinks? I don't. Focus._

As they ran and jumped, Arthur's instinctual scanning of the dreamscape began to notice wavers in the marble walls around them. Arthur tried to calculate how long it had been since Hans was shot - at least five minutes. He's going to wake up soon and we haven't even reached Sandy yet._

Finally, Arthur and Eva came upon the group of projections. Arthur was feeling out of breath, and his whole body hurt. He was not ready to fight middle aged bankers with staplers.

But, miraculously, with Eva in tow, the projections totally ignored them, still meandering forward onto random staircases. Arthur kept towing Eva towards the right staircase, but she pulled him back, slowing him down as he dragged her along. "Why are people acting so weird? I know that guy, that's Hank, from Accounting. He looks soâ€œ unhinged. This can't be real."

Can't have her start questioning reality now, Arthur thought.

There's a reason you're in this business, darling, you lie all the time. Lie to her. What would I say? Eames' voice whispered encouragingly into Arthur's ear.

"Um, Eva," Arthur began hesitantly, keenly aware of the time running out as more tremors ran within the walls.

"Yes, Eames?" Eva asked.

Weird hearing her call me that. "Okay, so the safe I told you about, there's been a huge breach in CurrencyCorp, you know, our work. Apparently the secret in this safe is important enough the rival company has been threatening your - our - co-worker's families. These people are desperate to get this secret. So, we need to get to that woman, and, ehm, ask her what we can do to get out unscathed. Listen and follow me, and we'll be fine." Eva blanched, and turned even paler, but motioned for Arthur to lead the way. She shook off his grip on her arm, squeezed his hand, and took a steady breath.

"Let's go." With Eva's full compliance, Arthur made much better headway, finally, finally, reaching the other side of the marble floor. Spotting Sandy, Arthur jumped off the last stairway and sprinted the last 10 meters, Eva following close behind. The tremors were getting worse, and even Eva started to glance around them at the walls, brow furrowed.

"Hi!" Arthur called, keeping up the pretense of being an innocent intern. "We need help. People are coming after you." At this point Sandy had turned partly around, confusion written all over the side of her face. She still crouching next to the safe, but her earpiece lay dangling out of her ear.

"Do you know what this safe is all about? Have you opened it?" Arthur continued, trying to subtly see if the mission was complete.

"Almost there," Sandy called, turning all the way around, rising out of her crouch. "I just need to—" Eva let out a startled gasp, stepping back. The tremors in the walls had migrated to the floor as well, spreading like cracks in ice, ripping the dream apart.

"I- I know you!" Eva said frantically, pointing a shaking finger at Sandy. "You're bad! You're an enemy! Get back. GO AWAY!" Eva's pitch was quickly reaching hysterical. She frantically looked over at Arthur for confirmation.

"No, no she's helping us, Eva. Remember? Those other people are—" But Eva was beyond reason, something having convinced her that Sandy was the devil. Her whole body was shaking in time with the fissures, and Sandy's tone of voice had plunged straight into insane territory. Her wide, panicked eyes suddenly flicked to Arthur's waist.

Arthur followed her gaze, to where his Glock was resting back in its holster.

As if in slow motion, Eva slid, scrambling across the marbled floor, Sandy's face looking nonplussed over her shoulder. Eva's slim hands reached for Arthur's gun, but Arthur beat her to it, wrenching the Glock out of her reach with his left hand. Arthur held his right hand out in a placating gesture.

"EAMES, EAMES, SHOOT HER! SHE'S HORRIBLE! SHE'S AN ABOMINATION! MY SON TOLD ME! EAMES!"

"Eva, Ms. Jansen, calm—" Arthur began, but then the projections were once more upon them, scrambling off the staircases and onto the

marble floor, now completely overrun with fissures.

They only had seconds until Hans died, and the dream ended.

The projections, now numbering in the hundreds, swamped their group. Arthur fell to the ground under the weight of two men in matching grey suits, his Glock knocked easily out of his hand with a jolt to his bad wrist. Shooting pains traveled up his arm under the weight of the men. Arthur saw stars as his head smacked against the wavering floor.

As Arthur was pinned to the ground under the men, his world turned on its side. Arthur saw Sandy's heels in the corner of his vision, among the throng of people. Suddenly, a familiar freckled arm reached toward his Glock, meters away from him. A shot rang out, and the frenzy projections suddenly quieted. The thump of a body hitting the ground was the only sound throughout the unstable dream.

The projections moved off of Arthur. He shakily climbed to his feet, and saw the motionless form of Sandy, her face frozen in a surprised expression, eyes staring vacantly. Eva stood a meter away, red specks staining the front of her white and black polka dot blouse. Eva turned toward Arthur, blood dotting along her nose like a spray of freckles.

"I killed her, Eames. I killed the abomination. We can leave now." As Eva delivered her speech hollowly, she pressed the Glock to her head.

Arthur realized with a start one of the men with the grey suits had pulled out a similar weapon, and was now pressing it against Arthur's coiffed black hair.

A line of sweat broke free from Arthur's forehead, running down the side of his temple.

Arthur distantly heard dual bangs as both the projection's gun and his Glock discharged.

The dream was swallowed by blackness as Arthur's eyelids slid shut.

3. Chapter 3 - Reality

Chapter 3: Reality

As always, Arthur didn't open his eyes right away upon regaining consciousness. This was good, because Arthur realized three things:

One - He was tied to his chair with some kind of rope, and the proficiency of the knots was unknown, unless Arthur fancied moving and alerting the captor. Which he didn't. Not yet.

Two - He could hear Sandy arguing with an unknown male in the room, with Hans' muffled cursing as the backdrop. Wait â€“ muffled?

Three â€“ He knew he should've gone on vacation after the inception. Cobb was right, he worked too hard. Too late to worry about that,

Arthur supposed. If he got out of this mess, he was buying himself a ticket far, far away. Preferably somewhere with mountains. Arthur liked skiing. Not the beach though. Suits don't work too well in hot weather. Sand was too messy. Sand. Sandy. Arthur needed to focus.
What's my problem lately?

Arthur had just resigned himself to opening his eyes when he was slapped across the right cheek. Hard. His neck took the brunt of the recoil, snapping viciously to the left. It took every ounce of willpower in Arthur's being not to flick open his eyes to catalog who he was going to murder.

Charming.

"Why isn't this fucker up yet?" The American male who had been arguing with Sandy must have decided to come over and slap some encouragement into Arthur's motionless form.

Emilia's timid voice piped up from Arthur's left. "He might not be out of the dream yet, if he wasn't killed."

Any competent person involved in dream sharing would know Emilia's statement was a load of crap. Hans, the dreamer, was awake; therefore any other member of the team would be kicked back to the surface as soon as the dream collapsed. Seeing as how Hans had been shot in the head, the dreams should've collapsed within seconds. Anyone in the business would know this. Arthur perked up - this was important, because for Emilia to be able to slide this one over, the assailant must not be from a past job.

Male, American, ignorant. Arthur knew a lot of people matching this description, but only one made sense in the context of their situation.

Colin Jansen had decided to collect, without paying.

A stream of French erupted from Arthur's right.

"What the hell did that terrorist just say?" Colin's Jansen's voice showed undertones of a European accent, now that Arthur knew what to listen for.

"Ray said he knows a stimulant that can wake Arthur up, he just needs to go over there to find the correct drug." Again, Emilia talked from Arthur's left, near the door of the meeting room.

"Fine. Whatever. Adam, get Mohammed over there out of his restraints, and keep an eye on him while he wakes up pretty boy."

There was some unintelligible shuffling, time in which Arthur felt the proficiency of the knots restraining his hands. He was fairly confident he could work out of them, he just needed a few minutes.
Time I don't have, Arthur realized glumly. Sandy had gone back to arguing with Colin, but Arthur knew he couldn't stay 'unconscious' for long.

Before Arthur could form any more ideas about their situation, he felt the brush of Ray's curly hair against his left ear, away from all the commotion. Someone was feeling his pulse. In quiet Italian, Ray whispered, "_Colin Jansen. Two bodyguards. Eva was knocked

unconscious again, by her son. Sandy knows them all. Be on your guard " I'm going to pretend to inject this into you, now._" Arthur felt a slight pressure at his wrist, and then it was gone.

"_Er ist wach_, " Ray proclaimed in German. Arthur took this as his cue, and groaned, rolling his head around in a circle. His joints popped, readying themselves for a fight. Arthur froze in mock astonishment as soon as he "realized" he was restrained, and his eyes shot open.

Arthur was greeted by quite the sight. The door was still firmly shut, blocked by a restrained Emilia. She seemed to be bound by jumper cables. Slumped against her in another chair was an unconscious Eva, her temple steadily trickling blood. Violent blow to the head, Arthur mused. Why was Colin so angry with her?

A man in a black button down stood next to Eva, holding what looked like to be a handgun with a suppressor. On Arthur's right, Sandy, Hans, and Ray were also bound. Hans had a strip of duct tape pressed over his mouth, and having been judged as the largest threat, had a man (who Arthur presumed to be 'Adam'), pointing a pistol (also equipped with a suppressor) at his head. And finally, in front of Arthur, stood a man with wavy brown hair, smiling with all of his teeth - and none of the warmth.

"Hello," the man who Arthur assumed to be Colin Jansen drawled. "We're going to have a little chat, all of us, about those wonderful passcodes."

"And if I yell to the oblivious bankers outside these meeting room walls?" Arthur questioned, picking at the knot encasing his wrists together. He vaguely noted that Colin was wearing a paisley shirt, quite like the ones Eames was fond of wearing. Arthur, motivated by the hideous sight, picked at his restraints more determinedly.

"They would not hear you," Colin replied smugly, polishing his suppressed Sig Sauer on his pants. "Currently, the nearest employees to us, besides my dear mother, are outside, hoping for it not to rain, as they have been evacuated by a bomb scare. There seems to have been an anonymous caller stating that he was going to blow up this building today." Arthur inwardly deflated a little. It would be harder to escape without the distraction of other people. Sinking farther into his chair, he noticed movement out of the corner of his eye.

"And why have you tied us up, Colin?" Arthur questioned bitingly, simultaneously glancing out of his peripheral vision. "Have you forgotten that we are working for you?" Emilia was motioning subtly about something, pretending to itch her shoulder with her chin. What was she trying to say? One of Arthur's hands was free of the hemp rope, clutching the slack between his fingers.

"As your colleague no doubt informed you, I have more than just the transfer of stocks riding on this interaction." At the bewilderment Arthur was quick to disguise, Colin smirked even more, jerking his gun over to Sandy. She was glaring, not gagged, although she didn't utter a word in response. "You mean she didn't tell you? During my lovely stay in the US of A, I met some interesting individuals that led me to my line of work today."

Arthur snorted, trying to puzzle out Emilia's continued tick while working one-handedly on a tight knot circling the base of his wrist. "You are referring to your exemplary record as a paper pusher, I assume?"

"No, sweetheart," Colin snarled, clicking the safety off his Sig. "My side job. Hypnosis."

Hans took this revelation as a cue to knock Adam with the back of his heavy office chair, aiming for the gun in the grunt's hands. Without taking his eyes off Arthur, Colin pointed his gun to his left, and fired, shooting Hans in the upper thigh.

A scream of anguish tore through Hans' gag, and he crumpled to the floor, his chair pressing on top of him.

"Are you done interrupting now?" Colin asked, rolling his brown eyes. "I'm trying to outline exactly how your friend 'Sandy' here fucked you over. At least hold the theatrics until I'm ready to kill you." Arthur finally realized Emilia had been gesturing to Arthur's gun. The Glock was lying by other mercenary next to Emilia, at his feet. Arthur didn't see the huge advantage that Emilia seemed to think it gave them, but he blinked twice in an affirmation that he had received the message.

"Anyway," Colin continued, and lurched forward, whipping across Arthur's left cheek with the barrel of his gun. Arthur neck cracked the other way, protesting against the harsh abuse. "Listening now? I met this wonderful murderer during my time in America. She, as I learned from one of my contacts, was a known serial killer; targeting people who were whistleblowers. But not ordinary narcs - snitches on what my associates called the 'dream-sharing' world. I had been working odd jobs as a hypnotist, hired by all sorts of people desperate to convince their loved ones of horrible things â€“ cheating being morally sound, murder equaling justice, Star Trek into Darkness being a great movieâ€!" Colin trailed on, continuing his clichÃ©d bad guy monologue, enjoying Sandy's (_or whichever name she is to Colin_, Arthur thought bitterly) widening eyes. Arthur's mouth was filling up with blood from where he had been smacked with the handgun, bruises forming across his jawbone. His wrist was starting to bleed from the escape effort, and surprisingly, the knot had been tied well enough on his right hand he was having significantly more trouble loosening it.

"So, of course, as someone who is paid to alter people's perceptions, I was keenly interested in this dreamsharing world. Hypnosis is only effective if the subject is willing. But to have a type of persuasion that was 100% effective? That would be heaven." Colin's eyes glinted, but his expression soured as he looked at Sandy again. "So my friends and I asked around, clueless college students, and made what was judged to be a little too much racket, trying to edge into this lucrative business." Colin leaned forward, stroking Arthur's bleeding cheekbone with the tip of his handgun. "And you know what happened next?"

"I can't say I care," Arthur replied, gritting his teeth as the barrel was pushed into the cut. Colin twisted the cold metal around, ripping the gash open even further.

"You should care, because your friend here decided to kill the ring

leader of my group, my best friend. And that's why I'm here today. Vengeance, sweetheart. Not only for the bitch that killed Ryan, but for THE REST OF YOU BOURGEOIS FUCKERS IN THIS FUCKING BUSINESS!" Colin's tone escalated, slightly crazed.

Hans lay twitching on the floor, his blood forming a widening sanguine pool as Arthur contemplated his options. Ray looked tiredly compliant in the corner; and Sandy glared at the side of Colin's head. Both of Colin's hired help seemed used to his rants, looking professionally blank.

"You elitists wouldn't let me enter the business, and now you'll regret it!" Colin was now twitching with rage. "You think a hypnotist isn't worthy?! Well, I got my dumbass mother to let you guys waltz past her defenses, only to kill herself as soon as she noticed that bitch swiping the codes! You played right into my hands!"

Arthur twitched, recognizing all-too-well the signs of a soldier ready to crack, ready to leave the barracks and shoot up the entire camp. If only I could reach my Glockâ€¦ His eyes strayed to the side, and Colin finally realized no one was paying complete attention to him anymore. "What, you fuckers, are you too dumb to know when you've been conned? Pay attention to me!"

Like a toddler throwing a tantrum, Colin raised his silenced gun once again.

Unlike a toddler, his actions had deadly consequences.

The gun went off, blood exploding everywhere. The contents of someone's body splattered against the glass walls. Everyone flinched backwards in shock. Arthur's eyes partially shut against the onslaught of body matter. He felt something warm and heavy splat against his face and drip onto his shoulder. Hans moaned from his spot on the carpet, and Arthur heard something crash to the floor. He blinked away someone else's blood from his lashes.

Ray had crashed sideways, falling into the corner of the room. Ray's head was now partially missing his skull, the insides now staining the floor and frosted glass.

If Arthur hadn't been so jaded he would've gagged. As it was, he felt as though he taking part in some kind of D-rated horror movie, complete with the slimy guts and pitiful villains.

Although shocked, the team all recognized it was time to take action, before another one of their bodies was the one staining the ground.

Emilia had been grossly underestimated. She shot out of her chair, completely free of her bonds - fuck, that's why she had been pointing at my Glock, Arthur thought - scooped up Arthur's gun, and shot the man next to her in the torso. Without a suppressor, the Glock seemed to shatter the previous deadened sound contained in the meeting room.

Eva finally jolted awake, lucid enough to take in Arthur rocking forward, pushing off from the table behind him with his untied left hand. He tackled Colin into the side of the meeting room's glass wall, his inertia carrying them both through one of the flimsy

frosted panels. They crashed into the next room, glass flying all over. Arthur got his bearings first, immediately stomping on Colin's wrist as he took in the plush lobby. Slamming down with the leg of his chair, Arthur sent the Sig skittering across the tile. Grabbing a piece of broken glass in one hand, Arthur awkwardly jumped for cover, the chair still strapped to his body. He sawed at the restraints, the glass cutting into his left hand in the process. Gunfire began taking chunks out of the marble corner beside Arthur, sending white pieces of rock flying. In what felt like ten years later, Arthur succeeded in freeing himself from his confines. He used the mirror in his pocket to see around the corner, and noticed "Colin, pointing his recovered gun at Arthur's face.

"I NEED THE STOCK CODES!" Colin aimed his handgun at Arthur's face, spittle flying from his lips, his face an unattractive shade of red.

Arthur opened his mouth to spew some bullshit, but Colin abruptly crashed into him, taken down from behind by a barely lucid Hans. Colin fired even as his arms hit the ground, a bullet speeding mere centimeters to the left of Arthur's leg.

Hans knocked the weapon out of Colin's hand, breaking his wrist against the marble tile. As Colin howled, Hans stated, "Ve haf seconds. The other man vas taken out by Emilia, but not vor long!"

"Got it," Arthur took the handgun from Colin, and crashed back into the meeting room.

Someone must have heard the gunshots by now. Emergency services will be here soon. Arthur mind raced as he swept into the room, noting Emilia training his Glock on a dazed Adam, Sandy still restrained. Eva was in the corner, looking shell-shocked. Arthur snatched the PASIV off the table, clicked it closed, and patted his breast pocket for his totem. In addition, he dragged the case of chemicals off the floor. _Ray doesn't need them now._ Arthur motioned to Emilia, holding his hand out for his Glock. She handed it over gladly, and Arthur promptly shot Adam in the leg. Arthur wasn't a killer unless he had to be, but he wanted to make sure the remaining team's exit went as smoothly as possible. "Good job with the ropes, but - get out of here," Arthur told Emilia, ignoring the anguished cries of Adam. "Make a new identity. Fly to a different country. Just whatever you do, don't stay behind." Emilia nodded, already heading for the door.

"And you," Arthur turned to Sandy, his tone changing entirely. "If I even get a hint that you're in the same country as me by this time tomorrow," at this Sandy's eyes narrowed, "you're dead."

Arthur pivoted and stepped through the broken glass without a backward glance. Arthur was not a man to waste time. He was also not one for goodbyes.

Arthur again took out his mirror from his inside pocket. He had first seen the corner mirror trick with Cobb, back when he was naïve and would follow Cobb anywhere, and believed every job Cobb chose was reputable. Ever since the botched mission in Lagos that led to a particularly nasty scar running across Arthur's thigh, Arthur always kept a pocket mirror on hand.

Aiming around the corner, the mirror's reflection came back showing Hans and Colin - except the picture was all wrong " Hans was now the one pinned underneath.

In the split second it took Arthur to grasp the situation, Colin popped his head around of the corner, and screamed, "If you fire, I kill your friend!"

Arthur slid behind the lobby's marble counter, adrenaline flooding his veins.

"You're going to kill him anyway!" Arthur shouted back.

Late to the party, four armed men suddenly burst out of the stairwell behind Colin, double doors crashing into the walls on either side. Arthur fervently hoped to see Britain's fine police force, but his hopes were futile. One of the armed men dragged Colin off of Hans, into the stairwell. Another fired a shot to the back of Hans' head, effectively killing Arthur's scheming to rescue the architect. I hope Emilia already ran for the other exits.

Retreating farther behind the counter, Arthur took quick stock of the situation. Arthur's Glock only held fifteen rounds, and he was five bullets down. That left ten bullets for four men, who seemed to have multiple magazines and were moving toward the meeting room, and him, fast. Need a distraction. Arthur's gaze wandered, and landed on a viable solution.

Arthur lined up and shot in quick succession two bullets, aimed for the delicate chain of the opulent chandelier hanging above the lobby. Not sticking around to see if the men were impeded, Arthur tore out of his hiding place to the end of the hall, the deafening sound of breaking metal and glass reaching his ears.

With the PASIV and chemical case in one hand, and his Glock in the other, Arthur sprinted down the cream colored hallway. A few bullets tore by, narrowly missing him, and Arthur shot back across the hallway, hearing a grunt when one of his bullets found its mark. Six bullets left. Arthur reviewed the schematics of the building in his brain, remembering the proximity of the high-rise apartment complex next door. Making his decision, Arthur pounded up the stairwell at the end of his hallway, ascending instead of descending. Once up a few floors, Arthur immediately burst out of the doors, running into a conference room, slamming the thick wooden door behind him. He slipped his Glock into its holster, and threw open the clasps holding closed case of chemicals.

Arthur's hands hovered, frantically scanning labels, hoping for two neatly branded flasks. Oh, no. The labels are in Arabic. Arthur grabbed two vials, leaving the rest of the case open on the table. He bent down, untying his shoe and slipping the shoelace out of its position. Arthur tied the two tubes together using the shoelace, and sprinted back out of the room, turning, feeling the wound on his cheekbone reopening at the sudden change in motion.

Please let this be worth it " please let these flasks be hydrogen and chlorine, Arthur thought desperately.

He ran back over to the stairwell, pausing when he heard boots on the

stairs below. Hiking the PASIV under his left arm, Arthur opened one of the wooden doors and heaved the two conjoined vials down the steps, and dived away, skidding across the floor

The floor rattled beneath Arthur, and the temperature in the hallway rose noticeably, signaling the detonation of _something_, at least.

Jumping up from his stomach, Arthur hung a left, now full out sprinting towards the dead-end of the hallway. _God, I hope the building schematics aren't incorrect._

Hunching his shoulders and wrapping his body around the PASIV, Arthur didn't stop running at the end of the hallway breaking through the huge floor-to-ceiling windows. Glass flew everywhere around him - for the second time that day. At this point, as Arthur free-fell through open air, he thought his only concern was the lack of a parachute - only to feel a sharp punch to the back of his left shoulder.

Arthur's momentum was such that his body careened in a wide arc through the empty air. His hands grasped desperately above him, the PASIV abandoned as he grasped onto the ledge of the adjacent building's fire escape. Legs kicking, Arthur swung through the air. With a grunt, he hauled himself over the railing and onto the platform, crumpling in exhaustion to the metal floor. Arthur rolled onto his back slowly, feeling as though the front of his body was one giant bruise.

The only thing that propelled Arthur to his feet was a spreading numbness, then intense burning in his left shoulder. He was definitely wounded, meaning that the other shooters hadn't been far behind at the time of his leap. Rolling to his feet and suppressing a moan, Arthur spotted a man in black peering out the shattered window. Lining up his Glock, arm trembling with exhaustion, Arthur shot the man in the torso. The man's body pitched forward, tumbling to the ground four stories below.

They were in a side alley, noises from a two lane road echoing close by. Arthur jogged down the fire escape, cataloging white spots in his vision as the spreading numbness made its way throughout his left arm and upper torso. After making the painful descent off the ladder and onto the pavement, Arthur peeled off his suit jacket.

A dime-sized hole decorated the back of it, precisely the size of a bullet.

Oh no, Arthur thought, rather removedly. _I've been shot._

He was no stranger to bullet wounds, incurring several both in and out of the military. Arthur knew he was in a state of shock â€“ adrenaline pumping, blood flowing. The wound was already hurting like a bitch, but it would soon incapacitate him if he didn't get treatment.

Arthur picked up the PASIV, walking over to the man's body on the ground, glancing around to make sure there were no security cameras lining the alley. He slipped off his suit jacket, grimacing at the blood, guts, and general unpleasantness staining its surface. He shoved his jacket under the dead man after taking out his belongings,

removing the one from the body for himself. The hole in the front looked more like a tear than the bullet hole in his, and he didn't think any cabbie would accept him in the state that other jacket was in.

Arthur glanced down at his shirt, sighing. At least he could cover most of the bloodstains and gore with his new found jacket, right? He still needed medical attention as soon as possible.

As he walked toward the entrance of the alley, Arthur pondered all of the tweaks he would have to do to the inevitable police investigation so he would (and the surviving team members, if there were any minus Sandy) make it out relatively unscathed. Another passport burned, for sure. Arthur figured it was too late to care about his fingerprints lining the inside of the building, and tried to remind himself to take care of the police report later, bullet wounds now.

He walked onto the sidewalk lining the street, gingerly slipping on his new found suit jacket. Both his shirt and the jacket were dark; people wouldn't notice the injury unless paying him close scrutiny. As he walked, Arthur noticed a woman in a blue dress chatting animatedly to her female companion, suitably distracted. As they strolled by him, Arthur plucked her pink iPhone from the top of her purse. He avoided all places with surveillance "convenience stores, street corners and the like. Spotting a non-chain restaurant, Arthur stashed the PASIV into a hanging plant outside the door before entering. Arthur then ducked into this shop, the first shop he had seen without security cameras, a small cafÃ©.

Once inside the dimly lit interior, Arthur cast the barista an apologetic sort of smile that came out more as a pained scowl. "Could I have a black coffee and directions to the toilets? Sorry, I don't have long off break. Some odd thing going on at CurrencyCorp next door, a bomb evac."

The barista looked up, and did a double take at the appearance of Arthur's face. Arthur had almost forgotten about the laceration he had incurred, and dumbly realized he probably had quite the array of bruises by now.

"Sure, mate," the barista said. "Not a problem. Not my business, but are you alright? Looking pretty bloody beat up there, in more ways than one."

Arthur took in the barista, with his blonde hipster undercut, tortoiseshell glasses, and cheery tattoos, and decided a more dramatic scene was the way to secure his anonymity.

"Actually," Arthur said, injecting a tremor into his voice. "Truth be told, I do work at CurrencyCorp, although I haven't even made it to my desk yet, bomb call aside. My, ah, boyfriend and I had a bit of a row, and I'm -" here Arthur acted choked up, hanging his head. "I'm " I was trying to leave him, you know, for good this time. But " but he didn't take kindly to that." The barista's eyes widened in pity and sympathy as Arthur's narrative wore on, and Arthur felt a flash of guilt. He brushed it aside, going on, "I really, really don't need my co-workers knowing about anything, so I was hoping to use your facilities to wash up a little. If, if that's alright."
Which it better be, Arthur added silently. He was starting to become dizzy from the pain emanating from the bullet wound.

"Yes, yes, that's good. Let me just let me get you some towels and such." The barista came out from behind the counter, quickly going to the front window, flipping the sign from 'Open' to 'Closed'. "Come with me, mate."

Arthur followed the man to the back of the store, flinching every time his shirt dug deeper into the wound on his back. The barista said something to Arthur about how the blows to his face looked pretty bad, and Arthur managed to form some phrases about how strong and large his boyfriend was. Arthur realized he was rambling on, and shut up as they reached the supply area.

The barista said something else, disappearing into the stock room. Arthur waited long enough that he started to get fidgety, contemplating booking it.

But just as he was preparing himself to leave the cafÃ©, free flowing blood from the bullet wound aside, the barista, whose nametag read "Eddie", strode back into the room, carry an armload of towels, ice packs, tweezers, rubbing alcohol, and anything else medical that Arthur could've dreamed of. This is the point where Eames would have remembered to say something snarky, like '_preparing for the next Armageddon or something, sweetheart?_' But Arthur could barely remember to mumble his thanks as he took the bundle, quickly rushing inside the stall, shutting and locking the door firmly behind him. He stripped off his jacket, took out the pocket mirror, and shucked off his tie. Arthur was glad he had left the vest only to the dream world for once. He surveyed himself in the mirror. His pale face stared back wanly, an angry purple-black bruise already marring the expanse of his left jaw and cheekbone. No wonder the barista had looked aghast at the sight of him.

Arthur's black hair was crusted with dark red on the side of where Ray had been butchered. His brown eyes looked duller than usual, less sharp. Drops of red crusted on Arthur's neck, although this time it was his blood, presumably from one of the two times he had decided to propel himself through a pane of glass.

Arthur unbuttoned his shirt with one hand while typing in Eames' number into the (luckily) unlocked pink iPhone with the other. He was desperate. Even Arthur would concede he needed help, badly.

The phone rang, and rang, and rang, while Arthur eased his shirt off his left shoulder, cradling the phone with his right. "Fuck, Eames," Arthur muttered. Hanging up, Arthur turned with his back facing the mirror, and took his pocket mirror off the edge of the sink to survey the damage.

The wound was clean cut, as bullet wounds went. Little tearing of the skin. But the bullet was still in the depths of his muscle, and hot blood was dripping steadily out. Arthur needed a resting place. He needed a safe house â€“ and in that moment, he remembered that Eames had one in London. Eames had only mentioned it to Arthur once, definitely not one he visited often, but still â€“ it was something.

Arthur stuffed the edge of the towel in his mouth, and poured rubbing alcohol into the edges of bullet hole, screaming into the fabric. After sweating for a few seconds, breathing hard, Arthur took his

tie, cut it in two with scissors from the copious pile of supplies given to him by the barista, Eddie. He fashioned himself a binding on his shoulder, literally stuffing some of the tie into the bullet wound. Arthur used most of the roll of toilet paper to wrap the awkward dressing, and finally washed his hands, wiping down the bathroom. He shrugged his shirt back on with a frown, leaving more buttons open than even Eames would normally. Finally, Arthur wrapped his jacket back on, hiding the bulge caused by the hastily fashioned compression bandage.

Arthur splashed some water onto his face, trying to at least make it look as though he attempted cleaning off his bruises. He took off the iPhone off the sink, and cracked the case, taking out and destroying the battery. Wrapping the whole thing in a few paper towels, Arthur stuffed the evidence into the bottom of the trash can.

With one last look in the mirror to assure himself he could pretend to be human for another thirty minutes, Arthur left the bathroom.

Eddie was there at the counter, waiting with the coffee Arthur had no intentions of taking. As soon as Eddie saw Arthur, he shot him a tentative smile, as though Arthur was about to break. "How're ya feeling?"

"Better," Arthur said quietly, feeling the bullet wound already acting up. "But, if it's all the same to you, I need to get back to work."

Eddie smiled again, this time something a little sadder reaching the edges of his eyes. "I figured as much. Just â€“ promise me you won't go back to that wanker. And, take this; it's a domestic abuse hotline number." Arthur hesitated, then reached out his hand, closing his fingers around the paper.

"Thanks, Eddie. For everything." Arthur gave him one last fleeting nod, and left the cafâ©.

Arthur felt his shoulder throb in time with his cheek as he strode down the street, keeping his head down. After grabbing the PASIV, he flagged down a taxi, making sure the company looked sketchy enough to be willing to be paid off. Arthur slid in, gave the address, and settled into his seat, wincing at every bump that jarred his shoulder. He realized he had crumpled the paper from Eddie into his hand, and smoothed out the note on his leg. Along with the domestic abuse hotline for the U.K., another phone number was scrawled, with a note written hastily at the bottom:

Call me if you ever need someone to talk to, or a place to stay. You're a very attractive man, and you deserve more than you have right now. You have a lot of courage leaving that asshole.

All the best,

Eddie

Arthur crumpled up the note, stuffing it into his pants pocket. _You deserve more than you have right now._

In another world, Arthur thought. But he couldn't see himself with

Eddie, as hard as he tried. It almost felt like cheating, for some reasonâ€¦

He must have entered some sort of a trance, because the next thing Arthur knew, the cabbie had stopped and turned to look at him, saying, "You alright, sir? You look bleedin' knackered, back there."

"'m fine," Arthur mumbled, alarmed at how difficult it was to form sentences. "Justâ€¦ just lemme know when're here."

"We are 'here', mate. Middle of nowhere, outskirts of London, just the address you said." Arthur looked around, and dimly noticed the city buildings in the distance.

"Oh. Here." Arthur reached into the depths of the inside pocket of his suit jacket, relieved to find that he had remembered to transfer all his currency. Sorting through the wad until he found the right type of money, Arthur paid the cabbie double the fare, muttering an unconvincing, "Keep this lift to yourself," as he stumbled out of the seat.

The cabbie sped off relatively quickly; probably afraid Arthur would snap out of his impaired state and demand the money back.

Once the dust and dirt cleared, Arthur remembered the address he had given the driver â€“ 5 miles south of Eames' purported safe house. Fuck, Arthur thought, barely lucid. I need to start moving before I pass out.

The trek through the wooded area was a humongous blur. Although the job had originally begun early morning, the light seemed to rapidly fade as Arthur continued his clumsy trek through the woods. He tripped over sticks, leaves, and the occasional rock, cursing the fact that he couldn't go to the hospital like a normal person. Every step seemed to jar each individual bruise in his body. Soon, Arthur was overcome, and had to sit down in a wet grassy clearing. The storm clouds had finally rolled in, and Arthur found he couldn't muster the strength to care about the downpour soaking through his clothes. He was done. Finished.

We're internationally wanted murderers, Eames voice seemed to whisper in Arthur's ear, taunting him. You're going to bail out on me now, darling? You're so close. Arthur stubbornly struggled to his feet, not stopping again, even as the sky opened and dumped down sheets of rain. Arthur knew that if he stopped now, he wouldn't get up again.

In what seemed like another world, dusk had fallen. Arthur had reached the home. Shadows made the stereotypical English cottage look sinister. Arthur felt watched as his tired eyes took in the ivy slowly devouring the chimney, and heard unknown animals scampering in the bushes close by.

An ugly gnome sat at the front of the walk, and a glimmer of recognition passed across Arthur's subconscious. Arthur slowly, painfully, disabled a trip wire at the edge of the gnome's feet, reaching underneath for a gold key to the side door. Cradling his injured shoulder, waves of pain crashed over Arthur, inviting him to succumb to the darkness creeping into the edges of his

vision.

Arthur stumbled up crumbling steps to the side door, leaning his tired frame against the peeling painted wood. Although Arthur fumbled with the key, his vision just couldn't seem to focus enough to put the thing into the slot.

He was ready to give up and bleed out on the wet doorstep. Just as Arthur prepared himself to slide to his knees, the door in front of him gave way, his only support disappearing.

Arthur stumbled forward, the PASIV rolling to the floor as he staggered into what he thought was a wall - until he heard Eames' voice.

"What the bloody hell is - darling? Arthur?"

Arthur just managed to turn his pallid face into the direction of the noise, casting his sight upward. Arthur's gaze registered the kaleidoscope that was Eames' eyes, right before passing out into his solid chest.

4. Chapter 4 - A Bloody Mess

Chapter 4: A Bloody Mess Chapter Text

Arthur was lying on wet ground. His eyes lazily traced cracks in the white plaster ceiling, shifting to follow a moth flying in fluttering circles around and around a dirty lamp. His head, in addition to feeling as though it was stuffed with cotton, weighed a million pounds. His arms were limp at his sides, a throbbing ache emanating from his left hand. Vaguely, Arthur realized he could feel a cool breeze brushing across his chest, goose bumps pimpling over his skin. Arthur attempted to raise his head to examine more, but promptly failed in the attempt.

Arthur must have made a noise of exasperation, because a mass of pink paisley consumed his vision and Eames' face swam into focus above him. Arthur had never seen this particular emotion written across it "was that concern?"

Oh, that's right. I'm at Eames' safe house.

"Yes, Arthur, that's correct." Eames' face scowled above him, inspecting and prodding the bruises and the open gash that marred his cheekbone. "To refresh your memory even further, darling, you also just fainted - into my arms. And I'm currently trying to figure out what the bloody hell happened to you," Eames responded tersely, moving down Arthur's torso, continuing to unbutton Arthur's shirt. His suit jacket had been taken off, although Arthur didn't recall the action.

Arthur became short of breath, a stab of panic knifing through him as he realized he didn't have his totem. He didn't know why he would be dreaming up all these injuries, but the fact that he had made it to Eames' safe house "and Eames" seemed too improbable to be true.

Arthur dragged his left hand around frantically, smearing something

warm and wet across the rough wood. Arthur was on the verge of a panic attack when Eames darted away from his side, snagging the suit jacket from a coat hook. Wordlessly, Eames crouched down, placing the jacket within easy reach. Arthur felt clumsily around, blood gushing from his hand. But, finally, he was able to locate the dice, barely comprehending Eames' voice in the background saying_breathe, Arthur, breathe._

At the sight of the twin threes, Arthur turned his head skyward, relieved. Eames guided Arthur's scarlet hand over the blood-soaked floor, and gently closed his fingers around the dice. Eames then helped him slip the totem into Arthur's pants pocket, all without taking or touching the blood-smeared totem.

With the jolt of adrenaline still in his system, Arthur noticed more goose bumps rising on his exposed upper chest, where the shirt had already been partially opened.

My shirt's being unbuttoned. That's where the breeze was coming from.

"Arthur, if you weren't half conscious at the moment, I would be mocking you for stating the obvious. As it stands, please do shut up. Unless you're willing to tell me exactly what parts of your body are bleeding out, because I'm trying to preserve my welcome mat over here." Eames had apparently given up with the tiny buttons on Arthur's button-down. He instead was reaching into his shorts, where he procured a large Swiss army knife.

"I didn't mean to say those things out loud," Arthur said self-consciously, wincing as Eames slid the sliced-open shirt out from under him.

Arthur tried to move his upper body to sit up. Eames immediately pressed a restraining hand against Arthur's sternum, halting any further movement. Arthur's breath rushed out in a _whoosh_, the pressure pushing his poor blood-drenched tie further into the bullet wound.

Arthur's vision wavered, the ceiling going fuzzy around him. He saw dark spots, obscuring the moth's progress around the dingy light.

Blinking, Arthur flinched back from the pain into the hard floor. His breath came back in jagged gasps, his ribs aching. Eames' unfocused face loomed centimeters away. "_Arthur_. Darling. Arthur!" Eames tried to get his attention.

"Wwwwwhat?" Arthur slurred, confused at Eames' urgency. Once in focus, Arthur noticed Eames' face had a solemn cast, as though he was preparing Arthur's eulogy.

"I need to know where the bloody hell you are hurt. Now," Eames said flatly. His voice had taken on a different sort of firmness. Arthur was immediately reminded of an officer demanding information from a soldier. His subconscious immediately latched onto this, snapping to attention. He noted Eames' eyes glinting in the yellow light, finding something slightly tremulous in the other man's gaze.

"Laceration on my face. Bruising. Both sides." Arthur took a shallow

breath, noticing the pain it caused. "My ribs are damaged from impact with glass. Rope burns on wrist. Pretty sure there's still glass in my left hand. Eames, I need stitches." Eames was paying close attention as Arthur listed the injuries, immediately flipping Arthur's bleeding palm towards him at the mention of stitches. Eames tore off his own shirt ungracefully, revealing a rather tan chest. He tied the pink fabric around Arthur's hand, Arthur muttering, "The only good use for that rag." Belatedly, a thought occurred to Arthur. "Oh. I forgot. A bullet wound. Left shoulder. Still embedded, I think," Arthur added, an afterthought.

Eames stared at Arthur for a moment, radiating disbelief. "And you didn't think to mention that first? Rather important, wouldn't you say?"

Eames didn't wait for a response, dropping Arthur's wrapped hand, taking Arthur's right side in his grip. Before Arthur could understand what he was doing, Eames slipped his arms under Arthur's body, one under the crook of his knees and the other centimeters below the entrance wound of the bullet. Arthur left a puddle of diluted blood and water behind as Eames lifted him off the wood.

Arthur himself let out a noise of protest, mumbling complaints as he was hauled off the ground - *like some damsel in distress*, Arthur thought hazily.

"I'm about to ruin my kitchen tablecloth for you," Eames griped, maneuvering through the entryway into a small living room. Arthur heard the *drip, drip* of his blood along the carpeted floor, unconsciously noting the feminine wallpaper and the blue china collection as they made their way into the kitchen.

They must have been quite the picture, Eames the shirtless seraph, and Arthur, a bruised and bloodied human.

Arthur must have drifted off again, because the next thing he knew, Eames was repeating something, once again looming over Arthur's face. A bright kitchen light shone above him, illuminating Eames' head in some kind of halo. *He's like an angel*, Arthur thought blearily.

Eames prodded Arthur, his brain slowly becoming conscious. "Arthur, I need you to stop talking about soddin' cherubs and let me flip you over. Brace yourself with your hands, alright? I don't want you to slam down."

"Okay," Arthur croaked, his mouth as dry as a desert.

Eames, still shirtless, laid his large hands on either side of Arthur's torso, manhandling him onto to his side. Eames' palms felt like burning irons on Arthur's skin. Arthur became aware of how cold he was, shivers radiating through him.

Arthur said as much to Eames as he was pushed onto his stomach, barely able to slow his descent onto the checkered tablecloth. "That's because of the blood loss, Arthur," Eames said in response. "Sit tight for a moment." Eames, out of Arthur's range of sight, shuffled around before returning with a white dishtowel, which he shoved under Arthur's chin. Arthur's eyes focused on the embroidered

daisies on its surface, his brows crinkling in confusion.

"Eames?" Arthur called weakly from the table; his arms curling loosely around the edges of the cloth. His hand throbbed within the sacrificed shirt, no doubt still saturating it with blood.

"What, darling?" Eames' voice called from behind him, his steps quickening over the linoleum of the floor.

"Why â€“ why does your dishtowel have flowers on it?"

Eames steps faltered. He dumped the first aid supplies onto the counter in front of Arthur.

"Because they're my mum's," Eames responding gruffly, turning to the sink to wash his hands, his back to Arthur. Eames was again clothed, an old maroon sweatshirt advertising the stiff set of his shoulders. "We'll talk about whatever you want later. But right now, let's focus on the fact that you got shot," Eames said shortly, turning back toward Arthur's prone form.

Eames leaned over Arthur, the fabric of his sweatshirt brushing Arthur's side. "Is this toilet paper?" Eames tore off the outer wrappings of the bandage. Arthur elected not to answer, instead bracing himself for the inevitable agony of the tie removal. Eames let out a low whistle after the last of the toilet paper. "Arthur â€“ is that your tie stuffed in the bullet wound?"

"CafÃ© not a multitudeâ€| bandagesâ€|" is what came out of Arthur's mouth, although he meant to say, "I was in a cafÃ©, there weren't exactly a multitude of bandages at my disposal." He was having some trouble breathing on his stomach, and was wishing Eames would hurry up â€“ or at least fucking finish him off, already.

"Never mind, love, save your breath." Eames shifted even farther over Arthur, his hot hands cataloguing the span of Arthur's back. "This tie's coming out on three, yeah?"

Arthur nodded, clamping down on the towel with his teeth.

"Alright. One-" Eames, the bastard, yanked the tie out prematurely, and poured the contents of a hidden bottle of what Arthur suspected to be alcohol - onto the open wound. It felt as though shards of glass had been jabbed under Arthur's skin, the fluid thrashing his insides like liquid fire. Arthur let out an uncontrollable yell, opening his mouth despite the dishtowel between his teeth.

It took Arthur a minute or two to compose himself, in which time Eames washed his back with yet another towel, warm water sluicing god-knows-what off of Arthur's skin. "Sorry about the vodka, mate. Last thing I need is an infection on my hands, you're loony enough at the moment." Eames plopped the wet towel on the table. "So I can either take the bullet out now, or put on a compression bandage and wait. It would be safer to wait, honestly, but if I do you might not have full use of that shoulder anytime soon."

"Take it out," Arthur replied automatically. Nothing could be worse than the vodka.

As it turned out, Arthur was wrong. As soon as Eames probed the entrance with the sterilized prongs, Arthur passed out, again. He woke up to Eames maneuvering his form into a sitting position, wrapping the finishing touches on the bandage. For once, Eames had been efficient, quickly stitching the wound.

"I need to look at your hand now, darling," Eames said quietly. His warm torso curled around the back of Arthur, preventing him from diving head-first off the back of the table.

As Eames stitched Arthur's hand with black thread, Arthur's mind wandered. He gazed out the small kitchen window above the sink, tracing the faint glint of Orion's Belt with his eyes. The stars are beautiful tonight.

Arthur didn't notice Eames wrapping his chest until suddenly he could actually breathe. "Bruised ribs," Eames declared, feeling around. He rubbed some kind of stinging salve on the rope burns that circled Arthur's wrists. Finally, Eames came in front of Arthur to gingerly cradle his shoulders in each of his warm hands. Eames' multi-colored eyes met Arthur's own for a brief second, a frown tugging at his lips. "I don't think that cut on your face needs stitches, although it looks bloody painful. I cleaned it out while you were unconscious."

Eames broke his eye contact with Arthur, looked around at the kitchen, and sighed. Arthur belatedly followed his sweeping gaze.

The moon's rays shining through kitchen window illuminated the various bloody towels strewn across the floor, a ruined paisley shirt, some bits of thread, bandages, and an abandoned vodka bottle piled in a corner. Arthur's trail of blood had long dried across the tiles, marking a stained path in the living room.

"At least you're not dead." Eames said at last. "I was worried about my welcome mat for a moment there."

Arthur didn't even think to respond. The only thought flitting across Arthur's mind at the moment was how warm Eames' chest seemed to be, his head rocking forward, falling into the maroon sweatshirt.

"Time for bed," said Eames. He rocked Arthur off the kitchen table onto the tile, one hand on the small of his back, the other slinging Arthur's arm across his shoulders.

Arthur really tried, but his legs just couldn't seem to stay upright, even with Eames holding most of the burden. "Let's go," Eames said, and, without consulting Arthur, swept behind Arthur's knees, knocking him off his feet.

Eames carried Arthur like that through the house, Arthur uncomplaining, his exhaustion rendering him a docile passenger. Eames made his way up narrow wooden steps and down a dark hall, the ceiling swirling and rolling under Arthur's gaze.

Eames turned, coming to a stop in a quiet bedroom. He laid Arthur on top of a white checkered quilt, his gaze sweeping over Arthur from head to toe.

Arthur felt absolutely naked, although he still had his pants. He was swathed in bandages, every part of him aching something fierce. Turning his head self-consciously, Arthur noticed a window shining in the corner of the room. Once again, he spotted Orion's Belt, further along in the cloudy sky.

"The stars are beautiful tonight, Eames."

"I know, darling," Eames said softly. "I know."

5. Chapter 5 - Okay

Chapter 5: Okay

When Arthur woke up, he felt as though he had been asleep for a million years. Everything around him felt surreal, heavy. His limbs felt coated in sticky syrup, stuck in place. His mind was slow, sluggish.

When Arthur finally motivated himself to open his eyes, they opened to darkness. Not recognizing the ceiling, or the weight of the blankets on top of him, panic began to skate across the surface of his mind. Arthur's breath quickened, although he was quick to control the noise. An ache began to develop deep in his chest. Where am I?

Arthur snapped his head to the side, and immediately had to shut his eyes against the onslaught of pain that greeted him. Dizzying waves of agony crashed over his left side. Arthur's instinctive response was to clench his fists, but both of his hands protested from the movement.

In his left palm, Arthur felt the telltale prickle of freshly done sutures. Feeling the raised thread, Arthur concluded the crosses were too wide to be his usual modus operandi, but too methodical to be done by himself in his current state. Soâ€œ! I have a friend somewhere.

The pain finally lessening, Arthur again cautiously opened his eyes, blinking owlishly as his gaze adjusted to the darkness around him. Still with his head turned, Arthur saw a light colored wall. Moonlight streaked in faint segmented rays across the wooden flooring. Following the lighted path, Arthur's perusal of the room ended in the darkened corner across from his aching head.

With a twitch of surprise, Arthur realized he wasn't alone. Somehow, some way, Arthur hadn't noticed the plaid armchair in the shadows, a figure resting in its depths. The chair was perfectly situated to face the open doorway on the opposite side of Arthur.

The person was slumped over, supported by a wing of the armchair. Their head was resting on their shoulder, and their thick arms were crossed over their chest. Arthur followed the curve of the silhouette, the broad shoulders, the jawline, and let out a breath he didn't know he had been holding. It was Eames. He was at Eames'. Eames had stitched his hand. He was okay. I am okay.

Comforted by this information, Arthur was again lulled to sleep by the sound of Eames' heavy breathing.

Arthur's mouth tasted like a sewer.

It was his first thought upon waking.

The second being whoever had forgotten to shut the goddamn curtains better run, because Arthur was prepared to commit 1st degree murder. Anything to stop the light currently beating down upon his shut eyelids.

Groaning, Arthur opened his eyes. He tried to move further up the bed, but found his both of his hands restricted, one below and one above the blankets.

"Oh, you finally decided to join the land of the living, darling?"

Arthur stopped in his motions, gradually turning towards Eames' voice.

Eames was leaning forward in the armchair, his bare forearms resting on his knees. He had traded his maroon pullover for a blue and brown striped button down, sleeves pushed up to the elbows. Eames hadn't lined up the buttons correctly upon fastening the shirt, one side of the collar raised slightly higher than the other. His brown slacks bore dark stains, conspicuously matching the color of dried blood. His normally slicked back hair was mussed, brown strands lying astray - as though Eames had repeatedly run his hand through the fibers. Exhaustion shone through his confident smirk, the beginnings of purple bruises of sleep deprivation forming under his eyes.

"Mr. Eames, you look like shit," Arthur croaked, immediately entering a coughing fit upon uttering the phrase.

Eames rose from his position in the chair, striding over to the bedside table. He lifted a glass previously unnoticed by Arthur off the surface, leaving a ring of condensation in its wake.

He moved closer to Arthur's position on the pillow, lowering the glass until it rested near to his mouth. Between coughs, Arthur wrinkled his nose at the straw presented to him. At Eames' long-suffering sigh, Arthur fumbled until he caught the straw between his parched lips. He greedily sucked at the liquid being offered to him, inhaling huge gulps of water until Eames took the glass away. "Slow down Arthur. England is not suffering from a drought at the moment."

Gasping a lungful of air after he downed the rest of the water, Arthur slumped further back into the pillow. I hadn't realized how thirsty I was.

Eames arched an eyebrow at Arthur, placing the drink back onto the table. "And you're saying I look like shite. Dear Arthur, I encourage you to take a look around and reformulate your comment."

Arthur opened his mouth, prepared to shoot back a response, but decided against it as he took in his surroundings.

Sometime in the night (Or day, Arthur thought, he really had no

idea how long he'd been asleep), Eames had changed the bandages encircling his midsection, leaving yet another pile of bloodied dressings heaped near the door. Ice packs and other assorted medical equipment lay scattered at the foot of his bed. Arthur felt a bead of sweat roll down his neck as he observed the huge mound of quilts piled on top of him.

"You had a fever," Eames said, following his line of sight. "Wasn't sure if it was going to turn into anything, although luckily it broke on Sunday."

"On Sunday?" Arthur questioned, feeling a rising sense of unease.
"How long have I been here, exactly?"

"Well, it's," Eames checked a clock on the opposite wall, "Seven a.m. now," Eames made a big show of holding out his hands, spreading his fingers. "So I'd say about three weeks, give or take a few days."

"_What_?" Arthur exclaimed, scrambling for a higher position in the bed. "Three weeks?!"

Eames broke out into a lopsided smirk, waving his hands in a 'calm down' gesture. "You're so easy to get riled up, darling. Settle down. I was just joking. You stumbled over my doorstep Friday night, and it's Tuesday morning. So five days, four nights, really. You've developed quite the bedhead, love."

Arthur already felt a headache forming on top of his other injuries. He was not ready to deal with Eames' humor, or any humor, for that matter. It was hard just to distinguish English from the throbbing of his other injuries. Which, now that Arthur thought about it, felt less like he had been shot and more like he had just taken a particularly bad spill off his bike.

"Eames," Arthur began, shifting as Eames guided him into more of a sitting position, piling pillows behind him with one hand while pushing him up with the other. "Did you give me narcotics?" Arthur asked, ignoring the fact Eames was manhandling him like some helpless kitten.

"I hate to startle you, darling," Eames began, "but you might want to look over your shoulder. Slowly, now." Arthur, brow furrowed, looked over to his left side. Upon seeing nothing, and at Eames' head tilt, he glanced toward his right side. Arthur's gaze screeched to a halt at his right arm. With his palm facing up, an IV line had been haphazardly taped to his wrist. When Arthur traced the line back to the source, he noticed the IV pole with two hanging bags. Well, to be accurate, a coat rack functioning as an IV pole that seemed to be doing a bang-up job. In addition to the first bag with fluid (that Arthur assumed to be morphine), he saw a partially empty bag, the bottom filled with, wait "Blood, darling. Had to give you a blood transfusion after your little puddles all over my floor," Eames said, casually, like he had just lent Arthur the Sunday paper.

"You remembered my blood type?" Arthur questioned, vaguely shocked that Eames not only had a morphine drip (which wasn't too surprising in itself, Eames could've been a drug dealer in another life), but also knew how to administer blood transfusions "with his own blood.

"Of course. It's A positive, compatible with my humble A negative. I remembered the one time you told me, because A positive makes sense, seeing as how you need to be perfect in all aspects." Eames smiled, some of the easy humor returning to his face. "Now that's all squared away, how are you feeling?"

Arthur shifted under the covers, glad when Eames reached over to pull down some of the suffocating blankets. He was achy, sure, and sudden movements were not his friend at the moment, but Arthur felt much better, all things considered. "Uh," Arthur said eloquently. "Like I jumped out of a five story window, onto a fire escape, with a bullet wound."

"Is it time for a story darling?" Eames asked. Raising one eyebrow, he scooted his chair closer to Arthur's bedside. Giving Arthur another sip of the water from the glass, he leaned back into the worn lounger. Once again crossing his arms over his chest, Eames eyed Arthur critically. Arthur tried in vain to stop blinking so much, resisting the urge to close his eyes entirely. "Or at least a SparkNotes version, love. I'd rather not have the Italian mafia or whomever you fell in with knocking down the door to my mother's house."

"You're mother's house?" Arthur questioned. Suddenly, he was wide awake.

6. Chapter 6 - The Plan

Chapter 6: The Plan

"Yes, my mum's house, Arthur," Eames replied to Arthur's shocked statement, as though it was the most obvious thing in the world. "Did you think I would own a carpet and drapes like these?" He asked. "I might not have the same fashion sense as you, love, but I don't recall ever painting tiny yellow flowers on every available surface while in your presence."

Arthur looked around at the room they were currently occupying, and took his surroundings in for the first time in daylight. The pale blue walls Arthur had noticed before had tiny blades of grass hand painted above the base molding, little yellow daises sprinkled about cheerfully. The drapes that (damn it) weren't their supposed job of blocking out the sun billowed about, white fluffy clouds in the light breeze.

"It's good to switch things up, Mr. Eames," Arthur said belatedly, trying to hide his displeasure at again failing to adequately notice his surroundings.

Eames raised an incredulous eyebrow, his uneven collar scrunching up even further as he tilted his head to one side. "Hold on one second, I need to write that down. Arthur telling me to 'switch things up' â€" I think it's time for me to dial down the morphine."

Arthur sighed, inwardly cringing at the idea of experiencing any more pain. He didn't even have his clothes on anymore, just his underwear. Great, Eames undressed me while I was sleeping. A man was not very intimidating to another after being seen in only his boxer briefs,

mortal wounds aside.

"Eames?" Arthur said, ready to change the subject. Something had occurred to him that he couldn't ignore, something that had been lost in flashes of pain and blood and exhaustion. "Do you have my totem?" Arthur queried. He knew Eames wouldn't ignore the request, and Arthur really wanted a second to think. Alone. Eames swept his gaze around the room, his face turning down into a half frown. Arthur offhandedly noticed the stubble darkening Eames' jaw, a forgotten remnant of the past few nights sleeping by Arthur's side.

"I need to find your suit jacket, darling." Here Eames rose swiftly from the chair, only pausing to fix Arthur with a fierce warning stare. "No. Moving. I will be_right_ back." Arthur nodded meekly, sure that a ten year old Girl Scout could beat him in a fight at the moment, although he would never admit it.

Eames disappeared out of the cheerful bedroom, his footsteps quick across the squeaky wooden floorboards. Closing his eyes, Arthur took this brief moment alone to think — not that thinking was unusual for him. But after being out four, maybe even five days, he was feeling pretty discombobulated, disconnected. The last few days seemed like oil poured on water — muddling and distorting the already murky events of the past month.

The trials of the past month flashed through Arthur's head disjointedly in a rapid succession of color and memories. —The slip of the needle into Arthur's veins, rickety lawn chairs, Ray's smiling face, Hans telling Ray jokes in German, their teeth bright in the dim light of a seedy bar, the limp handshake of Sandy, Arthur's first day casing the bank, the receptionist lighting up in his presence, Arthur's work spread out across a cheap hotel coffee table, lit up by the glow of a late night British talk show, Emilia's face scrunched up in front of a dirty mirror, practicing the pinched expression of Colin Jansen— late night tea gone cold, an insightful talk with Hans at 4am, cold pizza, warm beer, sketches, plans, exhaustion, more sketches—

Arthur's thoughts took a turn— _The uneasy feeling Arthur felt upon entering the dreamscape, the imposing bank that held Eva's secrets, the projections that eventually turned on them, Hans' pleading face down the hallway, and then now in the hotel, helpless on the ground, the headshot in the dream world, the head shot in real life, blood everywhere, congealing, changing the scent in the air — Hans morphed into Ray, fragments of his beautiful mind staining cheap glass walls— Rope burns chaffing at Arthur's wrists, his Glock out of reach, Emilia's pleading stare, Sandy's despondent gaze, the way her eyes never seemed to look you dead on, Eva Jansen's terror stricken face in the dreamscape, the way the Glock felt hot after firing, the masked men barging out of the stairwell, Colin dragged away, the running, running, heart beating, palpitating, tubes thrown, bomb going off, rug burns, not gonna make it, not gonna make it, glass breaking! Fire erupting from his left side, the impact of cold metal in open air— where was the shooter,_so much pain!— he's gonna kill me, Oh God, Oh God Eames—

"Arthur?" Arthur's eyes shot open, fists clenched, hair sticking to his scalp in the presence of a cold sweat. "Darling—" Eames was leaning over Arthur's bedside, crouching down by his left side. Once again, in a sudden instance of dÃ©jÃ vu, Arthur felt Eames take his

left palm, carefully unclenching his white-knuckled hold with his steady grip.

Eames kept Arthur's hand spread out, palm open, even with the shaking Arthur's hand was doing. Careful to avoid the stitches, Arthur's left hand was guided by Eames' large, steady grasp. "I'm sorry, Arthur, I was so bloody dumb, I forgot, in the heat of the moment a couple days agoâ€|" Eames' sure grip led Arthur to his discarded pants, held tight in Eames' other hand. Guided down into one of the slim pockets, Arthur's trembling fingers closed around his dice, rolling them clumsily on top of the lumpy covers.

Arthur's breathing slowed at the six dots facing up at him. Feeling the indentations brush his stitches, Arthur's side twinged in protest as he placed the totem on the bedside table across from him.

Eames was eyeing him worriedly, hovering, not yet sitting back in his armchair. "We can do the story another time, Arthur. It would be better if you rested."

But Arthur knew that just because his world had momentarily stopped, the world outside of this house hadn't. Arthur had to get things going his way before the job got even more messed up â€“ _well, than it was before_, Arthur thought bitterly.

"No," Arthur said, stifling a yawn. "At least I can explain to you the overview." And then he did. Between bouts of sipping from the glass (which Eames refilled twice) under the strict direction of Eames to _drink slowly, darling,_ to swallowing complaints as Eames periodically fumbled with one IV line or the other, or to check on Arthur's bandages ("I'm fine, Eames"), Arthur managed to retell the whole tale. He talked about Emilia, and her less-than-perfect forgery (to which Eames snorted and made a comment befitting of his extremely large ego), about Ray, and his inability (or, most likely, refusal) to speak English, to Hans and his scary projections, yet teddy bear demeanor, and finally to Sandy.

"You're telling me you worked with a serial killer? A real life, Jack the Ripper, killer?" Eames stopped Arthur mid-sentence, unwilling to believe him.

"We didn't know at the time," Arthur replied, feeling defensive. "Everyone has gotten rumors levied at them at some point in their career, Eames, as you recall by that time most of continental Australia believed you were a British agent masquerading as a stripper."

Eames flushed, looking suddenly unbalanced. "I didn't know you had heard about that story, Arthur."

Arthur smirked. "I was the one who made that story, Mr. Eames," at Eames' betrayed expression, "I did it just to save your ass," Arthur continued innocently. He winced at the strain that smiling put on his healing face, but continued, "So, to sum it up, the team is dead, except for the extractor, Sandy. Well, and Emilia may have survived. I'm not dismissing any chance after seeing her break out of her bonds like that. Bad to underestimate. Colin Jansen is mentally unstable and very much alive, and will probably be after me sometime soon, if he hasn't already begun his search. I assume he captured Sandy, but I can't be sure." Arthur motioned for the glass of water, and after

taking a sip (aided by Eames, although Arthur would like to forget that part), said, "And now I need to get back to the crime scene, because my fingerprints are all over and I really don't need one of my few identities in the U.K. compromised."

"Woah, woah, woah, darling," Eames said, shaking his head. "You aren't even standing at the moment, and you're telling me you want to go back to a crime scene? In which you are implicated in, don't forget?"

"But," Arthur began, affronted, "my condition aside, there's too much to be left unattended, I need to figure out who Colin is working with, and—"

"I wasn't done darling," Eames cut in. "You're not going anywhere, but I'm fine travelling and helping you out. Besides," Eames said, flashing Arthur his trademark smirk, "I've already invested too much time being your nursemaid to let you die at the hands of some second-rate hypnotist."

Arthur stared at Eames in shock, lost for words. Eames had no obligation to help Arthur, no obligation to let Arthur stay at his house in the first place, really. Eames had been nothing but helpful to Arthur, even donating some of his blood, not to mention the probable difficult-to-obtain illegal morphine making its way through Arthur's body at the momentâ€|

Yet here Eames was, looking as though he hadn't slept in the entirety that Arthur had been occupying his mother's home, looking as though his only priority had been to look after Arthur in his pitiful state.

"But â€“ but what about your mother?" Arthur found himself asking, too stunned to voice any of his musings.

"What about her?" Eames questioned back, clearly thrown for a loop.

"Seeing as how this is her property, where is she?" Arthur was suddenly struck with a sobering thought. "Is she alive Mr. Eames?"

"Of course she's alive, Arthur, my darling mother refuses to release her grip on life, in order to continually stay a pain in my arse. She's just on holiday at the moment, in Italy, I believe." Eames looked at Arthur, once again giving him an once-over. "You won't have to worry about her while I'm gone; she's not due back to England until next month. My mum is trying to savor as much warmth as Italy's beaches can offer, so she won't die only knowing the weak rays of England. I tried to get her to visit Mombasa with me, but she said it was too 'lawless' for her tastes, it's like she forgets who her bloody son isâ€|

"But, I digress, that's not the main problem, right now," Eames continued, once again making uncomfortably intense eye-contact with Arthur. "The problem, dear Arthur, is the fact that I wouldn't be content leaving you alone for an hour, much less the several days, even weeks, it's going to take for me to untangle the mess that is your botched-up job."

"Mr. Eames, I'm flattered by your concern, but I'm perfectly capable--"

"Under normal circumstances to take care of yourself, I know, darling." Eames finished preemptively, ignoring Arthur's glare. "But I doubt you could stand up, Arthur, much less function as a human being." Eames put a hand up, effectively stopping Arthur from interjecting. "Which is nothing to be ashamed of, you got bloody _shot_. Most people wouldn't be conscious at the moment, much less holding intelligent conversation.

"So I'll make you a deal. I'll stick around for a few more days, make some calls, stop some of Britain's finest in their searches for a day or two, just to give us both some slack. And if you're fine after those few days, I'll leave you the full run of the things, while I'm off looking for your remaining team members and tying off loose ends." Eames leaned back in the lounger once again, apparently satisfied.

Arthur, for his part, had sunk even farther into the pillows during the course of Eames' spiel, unsure of how the debate between him going back into London ended with the plan of Eames going a few days in his stead. "Well," Arthur began, silently cursing the fact that Eames' plan was so logical, so smart, that he really couldn't debate it reasonably. "Fine." Arthur finished, and, like a skulking child, avoided eye contact, pouting towards the ceiling. "But I want to be kept in the loop during the whole thing. Phone calls, diagrams, visits, the whole thing."

"Always have to be point man, don't you love?" Eames said good-naturedly, although there was an undertone of something deeper in his voice. Unsure how to respond to that statement, Arthur nodded once, stiffly, flinching at the way the movement pulled at the bandages surrounding his bullet wound.

"Of course, love, whatever you want." Eames said eventually with a wink, and a plan was set into action.

7. Chapter 7 - Call Me Bond, James Bond

Chapter 7: Just Call Me Bond, James Bond

The day that Arthur was able to make it downstairs (with Eames' help, begrudgingly), Eames sat him down. He then made his way over to sit on the adjacent couch. Eames was palming what looked to be about five different cell phones, and his eyes were serious as he met Arthur's gaze. Here it comes, Arthur thought. The moment where he tells me to leave.

"I'm prepared to stage a major operation on these bastards. Mostly for the sweet, sweet revenge, Arthur, but also because your death would be a major strain on my future point man prospects." Eames shifted forward on the white sofa, causing Arthur to wince when he noticed the dried blood stain on the arm to his side. Must have dripped on the couch on the night of the shooting. Onto the white couch. Ouch. "That being said, darling, I have no clue what I'm getting into. I know you gave me an overview of the situation, but it was marred by the fact that you were slurring like a drunken bloke at some trashy pub in North Hampton."

Arthur let out a breath he didn't know he was holding. Eames wasn't kicking his immobile ass out. He was just doing what he did best â€“ getting into character.

"Well," Arthur began, shifting uncomfortably on the loveseat. He was sans IVs now, two days into their 'rest week', but his ribs still ached with every movement. The stitches on his hand felt tight. His face was slowly healing, although Arthur was nervous enough that he had been able to avoid any reflective surfaces. The major annoyance to Arthur was the bullet wound, which kept him from doing, well, anything. He was grounded, stationary. Sighing at the thought, Arthur began his story. The faster he filled in Eames, the faster they could execute their plan.

"After the events of Fischer's inception, I wanted to continue working, stay in a routine," Arthur said.

Eames snorted. "Of course you did, dear Arthur." At Arthur's glare, he mimed zipping his mouth and throwing the key over his shoulder.

Rolling his eyes, Arthur continued. "But I didn't want to expose anyone in the team to unnecessary risks, and I knew everyone was far away and preoccupied -"

"Preoccupied?" Eames sputtered, his voice shooting up an extra octave. "Do I look busy? Bloody hell, far away? I was in the same city as the location of your incident!"

"Can I tell you about the job, Mr. Eames, or would you rather continue to delight in listening to the sound of your own voice?" Arthur deadpanned. Along the return of his mental strength, Arthur's acerbic wit seemed to have resurfaced as well.

Eames made a motion with his hand, as though Arthur was the one who had interrupted him, urging him to go on.

"As I was saying, I was trying to prevent unnecessary risks to the team." At Eames' pouting glance, Arthur added, "Yes, I know, Mr. Eames, it could have gone better."

"An understatement. That being said, the job seemed like an ordinary, routine extraction. We were to extract stock codes for a portfolio from a banker at CurrencyCorp, Eva Jansen. Her son, who we now know to be the slightly psychotic Colin, paid us. The team was made up of myself, Hans, the architect, Ray, the chemist, Emilia, our forger â€“ yes, I know Eames, she wasn't as good as you, stop giving me that look â€“ and Sandy, our extractor, who conveniently omitted the fact that she had, ah, committed serial murders a few years back. One of these murders happened to be Colin's friend."

"But I don't understand," Eames said, when Arthur paused to take a breath. He dumped the pile of cell phones on the plush cushion next to him, and scratched his shoulder, eyebrows drawing together. "What does a serial killer have to do with a hypnotist? And why did this Colin git hire you if he wanted to kill your extractor? A hit isn't that costly nowadays, with the glory of the dark web and such. Why involve other people, especially people that have experience in dealing with violence?"

"Colin Jansen is not in the right state of mind, Eames. He was literally frothing at the mouth while trying to interrogate us, some revenge plot over 'the elitist of the dreamsharing community' or some asinine reasoning like that," Arthur said, picking at the bandages peeking out of the v-neck of his olive green shirt. He was uncomfortable with madness. It was irrational, unpredictable, everything that Arthur hated.

"'Interrogate you'?" Eames questioned, his eyes glinted with something dark and hard, his fist clenching on his thigh.

Arthur made a dismissive gesture, although its effects were slightly dulled upon his gasp of pain at the quick movement. "Jansen messed up my face a bit, nothing compared to the pain of Mal shooting me in the foot or anything like that. He was trying to get the stock codes, along with tormenting the team. In fact, I got off pretty well, considering this was the point that he decided to kill our chemist, Ray and shoot Hans in the leg. He's an amateur, Eames. We were all tied up, but Emilia got out and got my Glock. That's when I ended up head butting Colin Jansen through a glass wall -"

"Where you bruised your ribs?" Eames interrupted.

"No, Mr. Eames, that was a different pane of glass, I'm getting there. As I was saying, a firefight commenced and Hans was killed by Mr. Jansen's backup, which also took him away in the process. They were in pursuit of me when I fashioned a bomb out of Ray's remaining chemicals â€“ don't look at me like that, Mr. Eames, it was a simple mixture, not rocket science. That's when I ran toward the first exit I could think of -"

"- and where you, and I quote, 'jumped out of a five story window, onto a fire escape, with a bullet wound'?" Eames questioned, disbelieving.

"Yes, that's when I was shot, I think. I was high off the adrenaline in my system at that point, so I didn't feel it until later," Arthur said. "I landed on a fire escape, rather abruptly, and shot one of the men, who fell to his death. That body's going to be the biggest problem at the crime sceneâ€|"

Eames spread out his arms along the back of the couch, apparently satisfied with Arthur's narrative. "So there's the whole thing. Bankers, hypnotists, bombs, escapes out of five story high windowsâ€| you have the plot to a Bond film, here, Arthur," Eames said with a laugh. Arthur watched him intently, noting with satisfaction the absence of a five o'clock shadow on Eames' tan face. At least Eames had gotten some time to himself, away from Arthur.

I hate being a burden, Arthur thought suddenly. I need to leave as soon as possible. Arthur knew Eames would not be happy with his conclusion, and did not voice his thoughts aloud. He instead looked over at Eames, who was still chuckling over the thought of Arthur as a Bond villain.

Arthur opened his palms outward in the universal gesture for Well? Go on - what do you think?

"I still don't understand why you thought working with a completely

foreign team was a good idea, but I can't judge. I've made some rash decisions myself, Arthur. At least you were saved by yours truly, so you could Die Another Day," Eames said, grinning from ear to ear.

Arthur didn't answer Eames, slightly horrified at the terrible Bond reference. He shifted to grab the tea off the table next to him. His oversized shirt bunching up in the process, pooling around his battered body. The v-neck hung scandalously low on Arthur's thin frame, his white bandages hiding some of Arthur's skin. Unfortunately, upon placing a few calls, Eames found out that Arthur's hotel room had been ransacked by Colin's associates. So while there was nothing of significance taken from Arthur, he was left to scramble for clothes and other items. The only thing available that wasn't elderly woman's clothes at this house was Eames' stuff â€“ which was woefully large on Arthur's slim stature.

At least I have the PASIV, Arthur thought with a sigh. I have to ask where that is.

Eames began to speak again, no doubt having concocted another dreadful Bond joke. His joking was interrupted by the shrill ringing of a phone on the cushion beside him. Scrambling until he located the right flip phone, Eames said, "'Ello? Mate I think ye got de wrong numba." His voice was transformed into a slow Irish drawl. The brogue was much thicker than Eames' usual tone, and Arthur had to strain to understand him.

The person on the line spoke back, although Arthur couldn't distinguish much more than their deep baritone. They had an accent as well.

Eames didn't speak again for a long time, instead intently listening to the caller. Hanging up with a clipped, "Yes, I will," in his normal tone, Eames flipped the phone shut.

Arthur raised a questioning eyebrow.

"That was Hans," Eames said.

Arthur's eyebrow rose to precarious heights.

8. Chapter 8 - A Gamblin' Man

Chapter 8: A Gamblin' Man

"You can't be serious."

"Deadly, sweetheart."

"I saw Hans get shot in the head, Eames! In the skull. Point blank. With a Sig Sauer."

"A Sig Sauer? That's so passÃ© of them. The least they could do was buy a Heckler & Koch. Everyone knows those are more accurate."

"You're just partial to them because of the inception job â€“ Mr.

Eames; don't change the subject on meâ€¦ stop moving for a second, would you? Think. This is one of those rash decisions you were criticizing me about a day ago!"

Eames was dressed in linen trousers and red silk button down, fresh and ready for travel. It looked as though he had just taken a shower, clothes sticking to his damp skin. His slicked-back hair left water falling in his wake as he paced around the cottage. Arthur watched Eames continue to rummage around, collecting various items from cabinets and countertops and drawers, and stuffing them into a leather bag at his side.

Arthur, for his part, wobbled around determinedly after him, in one of his Eames' white t-shirts and low-slung sweatpants. His hair was similarly wet, unruly locks sticking to his bruised but healing face.

As they moved into the living room, Arthur opted to lean heavily against the door jamb, continuing to reason futilely to Eames' turned back.

"This is idiotic. You can't just up and decide to meet a person you never met. Who, by the way, is masquerading as a dead man," Arthur huffed, crossing his arms.

Eames turned around. He was shoving a rather large utility knife into the pocket of his knapsack, and giving Arthur one of his signature _stop-being-a-stick-in-the-mud_ looks. "And what do you suggest I do, Arthur, not go? If this is a trap, which it quite probably is, I need to see who we're facing here. I need to understand the playing field."

"By getting killed?" Arthur questioned dryly. "You don't even know what Hans looks like, Eames. And since he 'had to go' on the phone, I didn't get to talk to him. That's a little too convenient; even you have to admit that."

"What do you suggest? That you come with me?" Eames asked incredulously, buckling a closed flap on his bag.

"Better than you dying without finding Colin Jansen!" Arthur yelled, agitated. He absentmindedly yanked his falling sweatpants up over his hip. Eames had removed the stitches in his hand after the phone call, probably to distract Arthur from dissuading him. Well, Arthur could not be redirected now. "Mr. Eames, my company would be better than you walking into a firefight alone!"

"Arthur," Eames said cuttingly, walking backwards to plop his bag onto the coffee table. "Darling," the bag let out an ominous thunk. "You just fainted in my shower."

Arthur felt his cheeks grow hot. That was a low blow. Arthur had conveniently been forgetting about the new bruise marring his forearm, evidence of the collision with the bathroom wall. Admittedly, Arthur would've been a lot worse off if not for Eames jumping in to catch his falling body.

"I didn't faint; I justâ€¦ needed a rest," Arthur contended meekly, suddenly finding great interest in his bare feet.

"'_Just needed a rest'_," Eames mimicked. "What - you thought the bottom of my shower was an appropriate place for that? While the water was still running? I had to change my clothes after fishing you out Arthur â€“ that was my favorite shirt."

"I'm much better than I was a few days ago, Mr. Eames," Arthur shot back. "If that was truly Hans on the phone, I would be interested in a conversation."

"And if it's not a conversation? If it turns into what you said, a firefight? Goddamn it Arthur, you passed out in my bloody bathroom!" Eames moved closer to Arthur, his leather bag abandoned behind him on the table. Weak sunlight streamed in through the windows, creating multi-faceted rainbows in the water droplets in his hair.

Arthur's shirt left a water mark on the wall as he pushed off. He strode toward Eames, his tone serious, his body language as threatening as he could make it. "I can't stand back and wait for Jansen to find me, Eames. I don't want to stay in the city with you; I know I'm not ready for that. But if someone in my team is alive Eames, I need to know. I have a responsibility." Arthur and Eames were now so close that their chests were almost touching. Arthur had shoved his hand onto Eames' breastbone; as though he could physically stop Eames' departure. Arthur could see the slash in his eyebrow from some long forgotten knife fight, his grey eyes looking at Arthur impassively, finally breaking contact to stare off at some point over his shoulder. Seeming to come to a decision, Eames' shoulders slumped.

"One day only," Eames grumbled finally, his hand clamping down on Arthur's shoulder, steadyng him (in Arthur's defense, this had been a long day, and standing wasn't his forte at the moment). "But at the first sign of danger, and I don't care if it's a fender bender while in the cab, you're coming home. Here. And regardless of whether it's Hans or not, you should come back right after the meeting."

"Probably that night," Arthur said, standing his ground. "If it is Hans, we have a lot to talk about in regards to the plan. And if it isn't Hans, we will still have a lot to discuss."

"We leave in thirty minutes," said Eames.

"One hour," said Arthur. "I need to find one of your suit jackets that isn't outrageously hideous."

Eames let out a long-suffering sigh. "I can already tell I'm going to regret this, darling."

As it turned out, there could be no taxi crash to send Arthur home right away. Eames declared mysteriously that he 'had his own method of transportation', and wouldn't divulge anything else. Recognizing Eames' need for dramatic flair, Arthur followed Eames outside without further questioning. He had tried to take one of the four duffel bags that Eames had slung over his shoulder, but Eames was not having it. "Are you forgetting you were shot less than two weeks ago, darling?" Eames asked rhetorically.

And so they set off, Arthur carrying only the clothes on his back. _Which aren't even mine_, Arthur thought rather ruefully.

Arthur was unused to being outdoors, and the day was unusual for England - sunny and temperate, without a cloud in the sky. He squinted in the sunlight, stumbling behind Eames, warm in his slightly large suit jacket. It became quite the task for Arthur to follow, tiring quickly as they walked single file down a dusty path. Arthur didn't complain, though. Eames, for his part, was in a great mood. He had seemingly forgotten his misgivings about bringing Arthur, happily chatting with him the whole way. He remarked upon how "shite" London's various football clubs were performing, about money he still needed to collect from a bet, and even said good-naturedly that he "hadn't seen this much sun since the last trip to Mombasa".

Finally reaching the end of the dirt trail, Arthur and Eames came upon a patio of mossy rock. Here, ivy overran most of their surroundings, partially obscuring a decrepit wooden shed. Arthur walked over next to Eames, gratefully accepting a drink. While Arthur sipped, Eames tried to tug open the padlock to the dilapidated garage. "Mr. Eames, wouldn't a key be of some use?"

Eames sighed. "We lost the key a long time ago, Arthur."

Coming up next to Eames, still watching him struggle with the lock, Arthur handed him back the thermos. Fishing around in his suit jacket, first feeling his totem, Arthur palmed two familiar pieces of metal. He carefully sank into a squat next to the stubborn lock, wary of his left shoulder. Arthur waved Eames away impatiently.

"What are you doing, darling?" Eames questioned, quickly moving back, his form casting a shadow onto the padlock, and onto Arthur.

"Would you mind moving over, Mr. Eames?" Arthur asked. When Eames didn't budge, Arthur looked back at him, saying rather exasperatedly, "You know, Mr. Eames, I'm not always useless, I have some experience. I'm trying to pick this padlock - and you're in my light." Eames gave a disbelieving grunt but stepped aside. Arthur took his two lock picks and began to work. After a few minutes of Eames' impatient queries and the sliding of tumblers, the rusty lock gave a satisfying 'click'.

Arthur stepped back, removing the rusty padlock, and Eames stepped forward. Bracing his foot against the bottom of the ivy covered entrance, Eames heaved. With an unhealthy sounding crack! the door wrenched open. Dust particles puffed out of the shed's dark depths, and Eames coughed into his sleeve, looking back apologetically at Arthur. Eames waved him forward with the other arm, and Arthur reluctantly followed inside, pulling his suit jacket in tighter around him.

The shack was much larger than Arthur originally thought, its size obscured by the mass of the ivy. Inside the shadowy depths, Arthur saw all sorts of tools piled against the back wall, ranging from an old lawnmower, a worn rappelling harness, what looked like some medieval torture devices, a few crowbars, several sharp saws, and even a gleaming semi-automatic AR-15.

Next to the array of munitions, Arthur took in the vague outline of a car. Once his eyes adjusted to the lack of light, Arthur resisted the urge to snort. Car would be a generous description. "Is that a Land

Rover, Mr. Eames?" Arthur asked, rather resigned.

"It's a classic, dear Arthur," Eames replied in response to his tone, creaking open the dented driver's side door. Eames seemed decidedly unconcerned about the fact that the car was more rust than metal, and looked as though it could belong in a shoddy antique show. Instead, he began pulling various weapons from the pile seemingly at random, stacking them into one of the empty duffel bags. Once full, Eames' began to heave the bags into the back hatch.

Meanwhile, Arthur walked around to crack the door open to the passenger seat, noting the avalanche of black flecks of paint that floated to the ground. Placing a slim dress shoe onto the corroded runner, Arthur swung inside. Once in the bumpy seat, Arthur grimaced, wrapping a hand around his left shoulder.

"Alright there, Arthur?" Eames asked, hopping in and shoving the key into the ignition. "This won't be the most pleasant ride." Eames fastened his worn seat belt, checking to make sure Arthur was wearing his "lucky this bucket of rust has them" before turning over the engine a few times, coaxing the car to life.

"I'll be fine, Mr. Eames." Arthur said over the roar of the engine. He wished he had held his tongue until the car jolted into motion. Every bump and every dip in the road was amplified as they made their way into the sun, the lack of suspension very apparent. They bounced onto the road with the undignified sputtering of the engine, black smoke trailing in their wake. At least the engine calmed down so I can hear myself think, Arthur thought. Leaning back into his seat, Arthur tried to remain optimistic about their chances of reaching London in one piece. Tuning out Eames' idle chatter, he closed his eyes, exhaustion winning out over the nauseating movements of the vehicle. Trying to relax, Arthur drifted, listening to the turning of the wheels, the creaky shifting gears, the radio, Eames' singingâ€| Wait, Eames' singing?

Arthur knew Eames was good with words; he was an excellent forger and a con man for a reason. But Arthur had never heard Eames' voice like this. Arthur was reminded that as much as Eames and Arthur had worked together, they never really developed a close personal relationship. Sure, they hung out after the inception job. But with confidence running high, Eames had told stories about his successes, about his family. It's not like Arthur ever said to him; "So do you have any other hobbies, Mr. Eames? Like singing?" But Arthur found himself intrigued, no, entranced by Eames' voice. Arthur suddenly knew, with a jolt of surprise, that he didn't want to stop learning about Eames' idiosyncrasies. Arthur had been trying to convince himself that nothing had changed between him and the forger these past few weeks. Maybe Arthur owed Eames a drink or ten because he saved his life, but it's not like they were blood brothers or anything. But something had changed.

It seemed Arthur couldn't remember the last time he let a friend drive him around in the waking world, injured or not.

Arthur's thoughts were interrupted with Eames' turning up the volume of the radio, melancholy guitar riffs echoing around the interior of the car. Arthur opened his eyes to Eames half-yelling, half singing the first stanza of "House of the Rising Sun". Eames grinned over to Arthur. His whole demeanor was relaxed, wind streaming in through his

open window, rifling through Eames' hair and rippling over his unbuttoned shirt. "â€|they callll the rissiinnng sun," Eames continued, letting go of the steering wheel to wave around his arms. "And it's been the ruin of many a poor boy," catching Arthur's eye, Eames winked suggestively, "Anddd God, I know, I'm one."

"My motherrrr was a tailor," Eames continued, singing with gravel in his voice. "She sewed my new blue jeans." Eames' voice was infectious, and Arthur found himself unconsciously humming along under his breath. "My father was a gamblin' man," Arthur was struck with the image of Eames in the smoky taverns of Mombasa, fingering his poker chips. "Down, in New Orleans." The rolling of the dice flashed through Arthur's mind, his dice, and his scarlet blood on the slippery wooden floor. And then a horrendous paisley shirtâ€| _Oh, damn it all._

"Now the only thing a gambler needs—" Eames cut off abruptly when Arthur's voice joined him, but attacked the next line with ferocity after glancing over in shock. "- is a suitcase and a trunk. And the only time he's satisfied—" here Arthur' mind flashed back to the impromptu celebration they had held in that tavern. "- is when he's on a drunk."

The instruments warbled on, with Arthur and Eames singing their hearts out, one with hands drumming along on the steering wheel, the other with his gaze firmly on the former. Arthur had sunk back into his seat, the knot of tension ever-present in his stomach easing, just a bit. "Well, I got one foot on the platform, the other foot on the trainâ€|" Both men began the next stanza with passion, Eames' rolled up sleeves flapping in the gusts from the window. "I'm goin' back to New Orleansâ€| To wear that ball and chain." Arthur's mind drifted to their destination ahead, to all the things they hoped to figure out â€" namely Colin Jansen.

Arthur caught Eames looking intently at something out of the corner of his eye, and he turned to follow Eames' direction of sight â€" only to realize Eames' gaze led back to himself. Arthur looked down at his attire â€" his stained black dress pants, the red tie borrowed from Eames, as well as the white dress shirt. Even one of Arthur's shoelaces was borrowed from the safe house, the other gone due to the bomb Arthur hastily constructed on the night of the action.

Arthur had felt naked that night Eames had stitched him back up. Moonlight had illuminated all of his flaws. But Arthur was alright being the subject of Eames' attention now. He felt healthier, stronger, and Arthur would be damned if he didn't sing this last lyric proudly. "Well there is a house in New Orleans - they call the Rising Sunâ€|" Arthur looked up, meeting the spectral prism that was Eames' stare. "â€|and it's been the ruin of many a poor boy," Here Eames' voice pitched quieter, his eyes still holding Arthur's, his vibrato barely audible over the noise of the engine. "And God I know I'm one."

9. Chapter 9 - Misconceptions

Chapter 9: Misconceptions

After the song, Arthur felt a quiet sort of contentment settle over the car. The companionable silence was only interrupted by the car's

engine and the occasional shifting of gears. Even Arthur's head remained blessedly quiet.

But, slowly, Arthur's aches came back to him. The dull ache in his head and the fresh throbbing of his arm competed for attention. Arthur felt the ever present pain of his bullet wound and bruised ribs, not to mention the spreading exhaustion. It fell over him, a smothering blanket.

Arthur felt like a rubber band that had been stretched for too long "I can't seem to find my way back into shape". He couldn't wait to lay down, preferably with some heavy drugs in his system. Arthur was ready to sleep forever, to be done with this meeting. "But wait, " "Eames?" Arthur asked, breaking the quiet. "Where are we going for this meeting?" Arthur said ineloquently, stunned that it had slipped his mind to ask earlier. Arthur was forgetting to manage everything like he usually did; instead he was putting trust "unconsciously" in Eames. Maybe I have a concussion after all, Arthur thought worriedly.

"Good question darling," Eames said, taking one hand off the wheel. Arthur watched Eames rummage around in the pocket of his pants, his hands seemingly too large to maneuver well. Eventually, Eames successfully pulled out a crumpled piece of paper. Smoothing it out on his thigh, Eames passed the scrap over to Arthur, eyes still on the bumpy road. Arthur reached out to take the note, tugging when Eames didn't release his grip. Finally, when Arthur got the paper, he squinted at it uncomprehendingly. Many seconds later, Arthur deciphered the blue scrawled ink that was Eames' handwriting.

"Eddie's CafÃ©," Arthur read aloud, incredulous.

"What?" Eames asked, glancing over. "Do you know it? I picked it out relatively quickly. There's no modern security, no cameras. But if there's a problem, I could --"

"No, no, it's fine, just sounds familiar," Arthur said in a rush. "What are the odds?" Arthur tried to school his face back into a passably neutral expression. He wasn't going to throw a fit over the tiny possibility it was the same coffee place. Eames already stated at the first sign of trouble Arthur was off the job; the possibility of having a past interaction with a barista was not going to be the deal breaker. No, they were going to get there early and scope out the cafÃ© and be ready for 'Hans', whoever it was.

Everything was going to go smoothly.

"Yeah, sure, that's what you said about the Jansen job."

Arthur's subconscious could be a bitch sometimes.

With a painful lurch, Eames maneuvered the Land Rover over to the side of the street.

Throwing the car in park, Eames flung open his door. "Ready, darling?" Eames asked, hopping to the ground with a flourish. He smoothed the wrinkles out of his red shirt, glancing over his shoulder at Arthur. "I can't wait to deliver some retribution," Eames said to him, slamming his door. Arthur got out languidly, pushing on

the door handle as he tried to shake himself fully awake.

Eames began moving. "Come to the boot, Arthur!" Eames' voice said from somewhere behind the vehicle.

Opening the door fully, Arthur eased himself out at a much slower pace.

Arthur stood, straightening his slightly large jacket. Arthur heard a thunk from behind him, and turned to see their thermos bouncing out of the car. It skittered away from him, rolling across the uneven cobblestones. Arthur cursed under his breath, slamming the car's door. Turning and walking closer to the rolling object, Arthur mentally prepared himself to bend down.

Arthur felt a strike of dÃ©jÃ vu when a hand was held out in front of him, this time proffering the fallen container. Arthur reached out, making eye contact with the woman holding the thermos. Dark skin, freckles, and pretty brown eyes framed by curly hair. "Those bruises look painful," the woman said slowly, her cream pea coat creasing as she looked him up and down. She winced sympathetically as she took in Arthur's face once again. "Bad night at ze pub?"

Arthur slowly straightened back up, feeling a familiar fake smile grace his face. "Car crash, actually," Arthur responded, focusing on her black curls and not her eyes. He had always been good at lying, but being around Eames made him self-conscious about his poker face.

Darling!" Speaking of Eames, his voice sounded from behind the beat-up black car. "Did you get lost your way over? Is London too confusing for you?"

Arthur once again had to stop himself from rolling his eyes. "Got to go," Arthur said, probably less apologetically than he should've been. Arthur nodded once more before rushing away, glad to have an excuse to stop human interaction. Arthur wasn't exactly Mr. Charisma at the moment.

Not that I really am in normal circumstances, Arthur thought rather ruefully. That is Eames' forte.

Arthur palmed the thermos in his tender left hand, joining Eames at the trunk of the car. The back was open and piled high with their assorted green duffel bags. Eames looked over at Arthur, raising an eyebrow as if to say what took you so long?

Arthur held out the thermos mutely, setting it in empty space next to the bags. Eames reached over him, unzipping the top bag. "So," Arthur said, eyeing the AR-15 piled on top. "What weapons are we bringing with us?"

"Not much, Arthur," Eames said with a smile that showed all of his teeth. He truly looks the con man today, Arthur thought distractedly, taking in Eames' predatory grin, silk button down, and gelled dark hair.

"Another reason I picked this cafÃ© is because I got one of my mates to swing by yesterday," Eames continued, oblivious to Arthur's train of thought. "He stocked explosives, cameras, etcetera all over, along

with a handgun by the toilets." Arthur nodded in appreciation, happy with the precaution. "The man on the phone was clear he would come unarmed," here Eames' smile became devious, "but I had no intention of returning the favor."

"I'll take the detonation device," Arthur stated, holding his hand out expectantly. A few years ago, Arthur had found out the hard way Eames was a little too explosion-happy. "I haven't recovered from the memories of Egypt just yet, Mr. Eames," Arthur said as he slipped out of his suit jacket. Holding the piece of clothing in front of him, he removed his token from the pocket.

Eames pouted, holding out the tiny black box to Arthur, as though he had expected this conversation. "Aw, darling, Cairo was a brilliant job. We rescued that dehydrated poodle and took down that mad religious cult!" He exclaimed brightly, conveniently overlooking the fact that they had also destroyed several ancient monuments in the process, and also may have redirected a part of the Nile River.

"I think you're forgetting about the part where we blew up a section of the Mogamma - a highly regarded government building," Arthur said dryly, inspecting the device. It had several buttons, each cataloguing a section of the caf . Doorway. Counter. Toilets. Stock room. It seemed Eames' friend had prepared a bomb for every part of the store imaginable. Arthur could only guess how he had planted so many explosives without being caught.

Memorizing the positions of each labeled control, Arthur slipped the box into his pants pocket as Eames slipped on the traded jacket. Although Arthur felt bare without it, he knew Eames would need it more than him. Arthur was loath to admit weakness, but he acknowledged Eames would have to do most of the combat if they ran into trouble. As Eames so colorfully described, Arthur would lose in a fight "to the inebriated, blindfolded, flu-stricken Queen" at the moment.

And therefore Eames got the suit jacket, to hide the bulk of the weapons.

As Arthur helped Eames conceal weapons under his jacket, he nudged him surreptitiously every time a bystander passed. They would then take up a position of nonchalance. To the citizens of London, it looked as though Arthur and Eames were leaning casually against the beat up car, chatting intimately. Little did the passerby-ers know they were walking by enough munitions to rival the whole of London's police department.

And so they had to pause for the umpteenth time, this instance being for two teenagers - that eyed both Eames and Arthur appreciatively as they sauntered past. Eames gave them what Arthur mentally called the 'come hither' look. Arthur pushed up the sleeves of his white shirt, looking down to conceal the contusions on his face. He tried to be shy and demure, rather than a man who looked as though he belonged in jail, a hospital, or both.

Finally, Eames and Arthur finished preparing, beginning the short walk to the caf . Even while smuggling the small arsenal under his suit jacket, Eames strode in a smooth, jaunty manner side by side with Arthur. Arthur, although not quite so flamboyant, felt much more confident than he had been in a while, armed once again with his

familiar Glock â€“ albeit barely concealed under the folds of his shirt. The detonation box lay heavy in his pants' pocket.

In the chaos of the planning, Arthur had forgotten about the impressive bruise currently marring his left forearm.

As Arthur's luck would have it, the meeting place was located at the very same cafÃ© as before.

He eyed the familiar red brick front with trepidation, the same large hanging plants obscuring the doorway. Unlike Arthur's previous visit (where he had been half conscious) he noticed the hand-carved wooden sign hanging above the shop, proudly proclaiming _Eddie's CafÃ©_.

Eames entered the building ahead of Arthur, his right hand inside his jacket. No doubt gripping one of the several tools in there that could kill someone, Arthur thought. Dimly, he heard the chime of a bell as he slipped in after Eames, the wooden door firmly closing behind them both.

Arthur scanned the cafÃ©, noting the empty seats. Good. Arthur thought. We're here first.

"Good morning, lads!" Uttered a jovial voice to their right, interrupting Arthur's train of thought. Arthur's gaze snapped over to meet the source of the salutation, the bruises across his face protesting at the rapid movement. "What can I get -" The sunny voice broke off, familiar eyes meeting Arthur's own. "Eames?" Eddie asked dubiously, his green eyes widening behind his tortoiseshell glasses. The real Eames started, bumping back into Arthur's frozen form. Arthur flailed out from behind Eames, away from his reeling body.

Eddie had been focusing on Arthur, but at Eames' sudden movement, his attention was redirected. Arthur smiled sheepishly. "Hello, Eddie!" Arthur called awkwardly, waving his right hand high in greeting. "Look over here, Arthur pleaded silently. He needed Eames to recover from the shock of hearing his own name without the scrutiny of Eddie added on.

Contrary to the pleased reception Arthur had been hoping for, Eddie's gaze darkened as it flitted back, his demeanor rapidly changing as he took in Arthur again.

Arthur was utterly confused. He could think of no other words for the emotion currently showing on Eddie's face â€“ fury.

Arthur stared back uncomprehendingly, until he belatedly recalled the fresh discoloration on his arm â€“ his raised arm. "Shit, Arthur thought. He pulled his waving limb back down quickly, but the damage was done.

"This does not look good. What other plausible explanation can I say? I can't go back on my story now, I can't be memorable, Eddie might let something slip to the wrong peopleâ€| "Why did I have to go with domestic abuse as my cover story? "Arthur's thoughts raced, quickly creating and discarding ideas as they flew in his head. What if I claimed Eames' was my brother or something? "But Eames' looked nothing like Arthur. And in the haze of the incident, Arthur

remembered babbling about his 'abusive' boyfriend â€“ his British, tall, imposing, boyfriend. _Can't really mistake Eames as anything else but that._ _Fuck. I'm an idiot._ _Seriously, why can't I think intelligently lately?_ Arthur berated himself silently, although even he realized that no one could've predicted this. _Back to the situation Arthur._ _Stop over-analyzing. Snap out of it._

Eddie, his eyes blazing, flung down his towel at the sight of Arthur's arm. He locked his gaze onto Eames, storming out from behind the glossy counter.

Eames sensed the danger, if not understanding the cause, his stance turning wary, ready. His new posture was too protective of Arthur to account for simple acquaintances, and Arthur grudgingly threw out the plausibility of 'work friends'.

Arthur tried to slide away from him, to make some space, but Eames moved closer instinctively. His hand was still firmly buried in his jacket. "Is this your boyfriend?" Eddie demanded at Eames, pointing at Arthur.

"None of your business, mate," Eames snapped instantly, domineeringly, his voice ominous. Eames drew nearer to Arthur, blocking his view of the situation with his body.

_You don't understand! _Arthur raged at Eames silently, trying to work out mentally how to inform Eames of the situation without compromising their identities. Arthur _still_ had no ideas. _I have to try something._ He edged around into Eames' field of vision.

Eames placed an arm against Arthur's chest, pushing him back. Arthur knew Eames had switched to combat mode â€“ assess the threat, protect the civilian â€“ and right now Eddie was the threat, and Arthur was the civilian in the crossfire.

Arthur shook off the shove, irritated yet understanding, but Eddie's gaze locked on to the commanding motion. His expression grew even more incensed.

_You deserve more than you have right now. _Eddie's past words rang through Arthur's mind, now a warning, a promise.

"Wait!" Arthur exclaimed, stepping forward. _Maybe if I reason with Eddie everything will work out._

Arthur was physically stopped by Eames again, with his hand this time.

"Doesn't seem to be the best moment, darling," Eames hissed, his eyes firmly locked onto 'the threat'.

"_Get your hand off him._" Eddie growled heatedly, stepping closer.

Eames and Eddie were less than two meters apart now, their postures aggressive.

I never thought I would be the person of interest in the middle of a love triangle. The thought sprung unbidden into Arthur's mind.

Focus! Arthur commanded to himself. _But what can I do?_

"Or what?" Eames taunted, lashing back at Eddie. "Who are _you_ to tell me what to do, mate? What _Eames_ and I do is _our_ _business_, and I don't know who you think you are."

"Wait, wait," Arthur began again, trying to stem the rising tension. Eames' hadn't seen the bruise, only the unexplained reaction from Eddie. _Forget about the cover. _Arthur thought impulsively. "There's been a misunderstanding-"

"Oh no," said Eddie, cutting Arthur off with a sympathetic yet firm look. "I don't think there's been any misunderstanding. This fucking excuse of a human being, this _wanker_ has the audacity to step in here, with his recently injured boyfriend, obviously by someone's -"

"Who are you calling a wanker?" Eames said threateningly, closing the gap between him and Eddie. He grabbed a fistful of Eddie's red apron, ignoring delayed punch to the jaw from Eddie. Eames shoved Eddie against the counter, Eddie pushing at the front of his chest, nails digging into Eames' silk collar, and Arthur shoved himself in between the two to separate them from actually fighting, injury be damned â€"

Then the bell by the door tinkled, signaling another customer.

Eames', Eddie's, and Arthur's heads snapped around in unison. Eames unconsciously loosened his hold on Eddie's apron, and Eddie took the opportunity to roughly jerk himself out of his grip. Eddie self-consciously ran his fingers through his blonde undercut, and Arthur stood staring beside Eames, calculating.

An imposing man stood in the entryway. He was wearing tan pants and an olive green shirt.

Eames muttered something that Arthur didn't catch, and turned to face the newcomer.

The bearded man, obviously sensing the tension in the room, stopped in his tracks. "Hello," he said pleasantly, the bob of his head accenting his buzz cut. "If this is a bad time, I will leave. But I am looking for someone, and I think you may be able to help." The bulky man's tone was clipped, as though he was trying very hard to accent every word correctly.

Eames tensed up visibly. He made a subtle gesture to attract Arthur's attention, moving his joined forefinger and middle finger, forward and back._Column formation. _Arthur's subconscious recognized the military signal immediately, falling in slightly behind Eames even before his conscious brain caught up. Eames then, slowly, as he asked the man, "And why would you think that?" stretched his thumb and pointer finger perpendicular, creating a universal sign. _Pistol. _Arthur instantly zeroed in on the man's lower torso, noting the subtle outline of the gun near the hem of his shirt. His military-issued shirt.

Unarmed, my ass.

"I know you can help, because we have talked previously. I am Hans." The tall man stated.

"I don't know what is going on," said Eddie, his gaze flickering over to Arthur and back, "but I don't think this is a really good time, mate."

"It's fine, Eddie," Arthur said to him, the calm professional. "We were just leaving. Obviously this man is confused," Arthur said pointedly, the scorn evident in his tone. Arthur slipped one hand in his pocket that held the detonation remote, fingering the specific button that would explode the doorway bomb. They might get injured, but this 'Hans' would be dead.

"Yes," Eames chimed in. Arthur could feel the daggers in his gaze just by listening to the tone of his voice. "This is not the Hans we know."

"Wait, wait, no, just - " The man lost his cool façade, his arm careening dangerously close to the firearm by his side â€"

And Arthur whipped his Glock out, Eames a second faster with his Heckler & Koch. They pointed the guns at Hans, one aimed for his torso, the other his head.

Hans looked supremely calm for being the sole target of two expert killers.

"Oh my god." Eddie stuttered into the tense silence. "Oh my god. What is happening. I don't understand. Bloody hell. Are those real guns?"

The bell by the door chimed again, and Arthur's gun switched to the entry way as yet another person entered the coffee shop.

But this time, it wasn't a stranger who entered Eddie's CafÃ©.

Wild black curls, a light pea coat, and slick black heels.

It was the woman from the street, the woman who had helped Arthur with his fallen drink.

She doesn't seem to be helping now, Arthur thought grimly.

10. Chapter 10 - Spilled Coffee

Chapter 10: Spilled Coffee

Arthur and Eames both look towards the newcomer. Taking advantage of their distraction, the bulky man lunged forward, knocking Eames back into the counter, simultaneously savagely reaching for and twisting his gun hand. Eames' Heckler & Koch clattered out of his grip, sliding across the slick floors.

Arthur tracked the man's progress down the sight of his Glock. I could shoot him, but what if the bullet over penetrated? And that woman might have a weapon, I can't ignore her. And so the fight began, with Arthur training his gun on the woman while still eyeing the two men.

Eames fought the way he lived — smoothly, offensively, and willing to take risks. The man was his opposite — he threw punches sparingly, probably hoping to tire Eames out. Good luck with that, Arthur thought. If Eames can take down five Nigerian arms dealers in the heat of Mombasa, he's not going to tire quickly in downtown London.

The man threw another swift punch, making contact with Eames' guard. Eames took the opportunity to reach down, knocking the man's gun out of his waistband. Arthur wasn't sure why the man hadn't reached for the firearm earlier, but he didn't dwell on it — he had bigger problems. Arthur saw the woman in his peripheral vision, immobile under the threat of his gun.

With his Glock still targeting her chest, Arthur ran over to her, strategies running through his mind in quick succession. Eames will just have to defend himself for a minute.

Arthur barreled into the woman, catching her by surprise. His body railed against the buttons on her peacoat, his Glock pressing against her sternum. She rolled with their momentum as Arthur tackled her. An experienced fighter, then. Arthur was prepared for combat — if the man wasn't deterred by a gun, she wouldn't be either. But the woman didn't try to injure him further as they rolled, her impractical heels tangling with his legs.

Slightly miscalculating the takedown because of his wounded torso, Arthur ended up on the bottom of the two, gun squished between his ribs and her torso. Never a good place to be. He kept a steady grip on her back with one hand, his Glock pressing against her ribcage with the other. He locked his legs behind her head. Arthur felt his chest and shoulder straining, but pushed through the pain, focused. Tightening his form, Arthur slipped his gun out from between them, positioning for a triangle choke. I don't want to kill her yet. We need information, not a scene.

The woman didn't react with blind panic that usually occurred under the threat of asphyxia. She simply looked down at him, her gaze steely — but not hostile. "I em not dee threat!" She shouted to him, barely audible over Eddie's incoherent yelling and the crashes of the fight echoing behind them. "I just vant to talk! Go help your freeind!"

Arthur was too experienced, or perhaps jaded, to believe her. She'll kill me as soon as I let her out of this. Making to a decision, Arthur constricted his hold, her arm caught on between his legs and chest while his legs locked around her head like a vice. She was unconscious within seconds, her body falling limp on top of him.

Nothing if not efficient, Arthur pushed away from her lifeless body, smoothly rolling to his feet. His Glock was back in his hand, and he could feel something warm blooming across his back. Ignoring it, he swung back behind the counter, noting Eddie's shell-shocked form on the stool.

Eames, similar to what Arthur had done with the woman, was trying to subdue the man. But the stranger in the green shirt seemed much less compliant than his counterpart, fighting back hard. Although he

seems reluctant to place a killing blow_, Arthur noted.

Arthur rummaged around over the counters, wondering why Eames was not using his arsenal of weapons. But he realized Eames was without his jacket, his silk shirt shining like blood under the cafÃ© lights. O_dd, Arthur thought. I wonder what happenâ€œ| can't overanalyze now. Hearing the woman's groans, Arthur shoved his Glock back into his waistband. I'll help you in a second, Eames, just let me take care of this. Arthur scooped up a green apron from behind the counter, and snagged the white towel Eddie had thrown down earlier off the floor.

Arthur was just rising back to his full height when the struggle between Eames and the man turned desperate, their bodies careening backwards over the counter. As they flipped, the two men sent empty cups flying, as well as knocking over the row of coffee pots sitting on a burner. Coffee spilled everywhere, creating a steaming tsunami that rushed straight towards Arthur. He immediately jumped back from the spray, but was unable to avoid the shower of liquid. Arthur cried out as the scalding coffee splashed across his left arm, staining his white shirt.

Shirt and skin still steaming, Arthur ran back to the disoriented woman, hearing the thumps behind him as Eames continued fighting with his formidable opponent. Arthur shoved the towel in the woman's mouth, dodging her kicking form. He was just tying the woman's hands together when Eddie finally moved, flying off from his position on the stool. Looking around wildly, Eddie gave once last glance to Eames before fleeing back into the depths of the shop. Arthur cursed silently. He better not call emergency services. Arthur finished binding the woman's hands with the green apron, completing the bind by knotting the apron to one of the legs of the tables. Arthur, angry he didn't think to do it earlier, locked the front door of the coffee shop, prohibiting wayward customers from entering. He then looked up, taking in the scene of disarray.

Eames and the man were standing up once more, both sporting an array of dripping cuts. Arthur whipped his head around to see how he could help, but didn't see Eames' jacket or his weapons anywhere in sight. If I shoot, I'll attract bystanders, and then police officers. Can we chance that? Better just take the man out together.

Arthur ran over, skidding sideways across the wet floor, so focused on assessing the fight that he forgot about the puddles of coffee. Eames' back was to Arthur, and the blond man was swinging to parry Eames' uppercut. Taking the blow to the jaw, the man twisted to grab a wooden cutting board. He swung the object, aiming for Eames' temple. Eames managed to catch the block of wood with a resounding smack, only to have his face snap backwards from the man's left-handed cross. Staggering, Eames' hands scrabbled for purchase over the counter, searching for a similar projectile. Arthur, seeing an opportunity to help, slid one of the half-spilled coffee pots towards him. Eames' grip closed around the handle, jerking the pot forward. Coffee splashed all over the man's face and he screamed loudly, flailing. Dropping the pot, Eames immediately raising his guard back up, oblivious to Arthur's arrival behind him.

Seeing his opening, Arthur dove forward, past Eames, grabbing one of the man's arms while dodging his fierce kick to the leg. Eames threw a hook to the side of the man's head, momentarily stunning him.

Arthur, still retaining a grip on the man's arm, twisted it back in a restraining manner, and steadied his Glock. The man struggled, knocking his head back in a last ditch attempt at a head-but Arthur. Arthur tried to dodge the blow, but was too slow, taking the force of his skull to his injured shoulder.

Arthur heard an inhuman howl of pain echo throughout the cafÃ©, and realized it was him.

Somehow, someway, through the pain Arthur's fingers still closed around the flesh of the man's wrist. Still partially blinded by red hot agony, Arthur managed a front kick into the man's back. They fell forward together towards Eames, Arthur fighting to retain his dominant position. He pressed his Glock into the man's head, and the man finally stilled somewhat, realizing it was all over.

Eames quickly piled on top of the man as well, forcing his head deeper into the puddle of lukewarm coffee staining the floor. He took the Glock out of Arthur's hand. "Arthur. Arthur, I got him! Move back!" Arthur's vision was still clearing. He barely even realized he was still holding the man in a submission hold. At Eames' command, Arthur fell back. He meant to rock onto his heels, but continued to fall back, the air escaping him in a whoosh. Edging back in an awkward crawl, Arthur rested his head against the counter, his hair becoming covered in the sticky coffee staining it. Arthur grimaced, holding his injured shoulder with a bloody hand " _bloody? When did that happen?_ " and let himself take a brief respite. But something niggled at the back of Arthur's mind, something he couldn't ignore " _the woman and Eddie._ "

Arthur suppressed a groan, staggering unsteadily to his feet. He stretched, stepping over Eames' crouched form as he zip-tied together the man's hands and feet. Where did the zip ties come from? Arthur decided he didn't particularly care, continuing to make his way over to where the woman sat, fettered to the table.

Arthur's socks squished with excess liquid as he squatted down next to her. The woman looked indignant, her dark skin flushed with outrage, her brown eyes glinting. If looks could kill, I would be dead...

Arthur glanced over, making sure the front blinds were still firmly drawn " _one thing that went right, at least_. Arthur untied her bonds from where they connected with the table. Still keeping the knot tight that connected her hands, he dragged the bound woman. Ignoring her kicking and struggling, he slid her along the floor, to where he remembered the toilets to be. Throwing her inside the room, Arthur shut the door, wedging a chair in front of the handle. Hopefully that will keep her occupied for a while.

Arthur strode back further into the hallway, to where he remembered the stock room to be. Absentmindedly, he reached for his Glock, but did a double-take when his hand brushed upon empty air. Whereâ€¦ oh, that's right, Eames' has it. It wasn't a big deal " Eddie had barely managed to run off from his seat, never mind join in on the fighting. Arthur didn't need a gun to calm him down. I'd like to think I have slightly more people skills than that.

Arthur crept into the stock room, taking in the aging array of wooden shelves and stacked products. Condensed milk, boxes of tea bags, and

rows and rows of coffee beans were neatly ordered and labeled along the shelves. Arthur checked the first aisle, and upon no sign of Eddie, strode over to the next one. He rounded the corner " and then promptly had a gun leveled at him.

_So it's going to be this kind of day,_Arthur thought wearily.

Eddie sat, huddled, at the end of the aisle. Eames' missing suit jacket sat in a slumped pile next to him, liner up. The array of weapons was spread out prominently; looking menacing even to Arthur's veteran eyes. Eddie clutched the .22 that had been secured in a side pocket. His hands shook as he pointed the barrel at Arthur, but he aimed it nonetheless.

"Hello, Eddie," Arthur said, deliberately calm, hands going skyward. "I'm going to walk towards you now."

"No!" Eddie shouted, waving the weapon, causing Arthur to flatten himself sideways, wary of discharge. "Just " just leave me alone! I don't know what's going on. I'd like you to leave."

_Typical English manners,_Arthur thought, trying not to let his mirth show on his face. _Anywhere else, I'd get wild profanities._

"Alright, Eddie, I'll leave. But I want to help you," - here Arthur inched forward a few centimeters "because you helped me when I was in trouble." Eddie looked uncertain, his pupils blown wide behind his glasses, his pale button up damp with sweat. "So," Arthur walked forward even more, his footsteps echoing in the small room. Eddie's chest was heaving. "Let me help you." Arthur reached forward, gently grasping the gun in one of his sweaty hands, lowering it quickly. He eased the .22 out of Eddie's shaking hand, turning on the safety. Arthur slipped it into his waistband.

Arthur hated wasting time, but wanted to make sure Eddie wouldn't do something rash as soon as he rejoined Eames. He sat next to Eddie with a sigh. He was unsure what they, being Eames and Arthur, would have to do to keep Eddie from turning this into a bigger mess, but Arthur figured they could deal with that later. "Better?" Arthur asked from his position next to the other man on the floor.

"Not really, E- mate," Eddie mumbled. "I don't even know what your real name is, and I've seen more guns today than I've seen in my entire life."

"My real name is Arthur." Arthur flashed him a guilty smile, reaching over to snag Eames' jacket. "Sorry about that whole mess," Arthur forced out. "I wouldn't have lied to you if it wasn't immediately necessary."

"I'm still not convinced your relationship with that other man is healthy, Arthur." Eddie said. Arthur sighed deeply. _Why couldn't this man give him a break?_ "But," Eddie continued, "I know you must have larger issues to deal with at the moment. I didn't know what else I could do, so I radioed for backup using a device in this jacket. I didn't think you would want authorities to be called."

"_What did you do_?" Arthur could barely control his tone as he

snapped to his feet, stress flooding back into him. He snatched up Eames' jacket, hastily searching for mysterious device Eddie had spoken about.

"Right here, calm down, _here mate_." Eddie reached his other hand out to Arthur, proffering a device that looked suspiciously like a two-way radio. Upon closer inspection, Arthur recognized it as one of the newer models used for communication within military circles.

Arthur hadn't known Eames was carrying the device, but he supposed it made sense. Although brash, Arthur knew Eames wasn't unintelligent, and would plan for disaster, bombs planted in the cafÃ© or not. _I wish he had told me about this earlier._ "Eddie," Arthur began, his voice deliberately calm. "What did you do with the radio?"

Eddie mimed pressing a button with his hand. "I just pressed the control that said 'call', Arthur."

Arthur could feel a migraine beginning at the edges of his vision.

"And what did you say?" Arthur asked, between gritted teeth.

"I didn't!" Eddie seemed suddenly proud of himself, smiling at Arthur from the floor. "I tapped out the signal for 'SOS' that my pa taught me while camping. I thought it was the bee knees back then, so I remembered it."

"You used Morse Code?" Arthur asked, feeling something tighten in his already sore stomach.

"Sure, mate, if that's what it's called. I could never be arsed to learn the technical term."

Arthur stared at him.

He could imagine what Eddie saw in front of him right now â€“ Arthur's bruises were tinted greenish-purple on his cheekbones, not to mention the healing jagged gash on one side, and his dirtied and stained white shirt. His burned pink skin peeked out underneath the ruined shirt, and his black hair was crusted in clumps sticky with coffee. Arthur's hand that held Eames' jacket was bloody, and his posture was stiff, a byproduct of his day â€“ too long with too little rest.

What Arthur couldn't imagine was the implications of Eddie's possibly received signal. With any other coworkers, Arthur could safely laugh off the faux pas and leave this stock room with faith no one would pay mind to the absurd gesture.

But the people in the dreamsharing world were not your average coworkers, especially ones who aligned themselves with Arthur and Eames. They were serious, often former military, and fiercely loyal.

Enough that they would track down a distress signal to a cafÃ© in the middle of London.

Arthur stood there in front of Eddie, these thoughts raced through

his mind, implications settling in. Eames' suit jacket felt heavy in his hand.

Without another word, Arthur turned and left Eddie among the coffee containers.

Sprinting back to the front of the shop, Arthur rapidly scanned the area, seeing nothing out of place. The tilted chair was still in place in front of the bathroom door, and the same chairs and tables lay knocked over, remnants of the fight. The only difference was that Eames had dragged the man out from behind the coffee-stained counter, and secured his zip-tied body to one of the support beams by the front of the shop. Eames was standing in front of the man, a kitchen knife held in his right hand. Even from the back, Arthur recognized the familiar set of Eames' shoulders within his tattered shirt. And as he moved closer, Arthur saw the clenched jaw. There was only one conclusion Arthur could come to - Eames was supremely ticked off.

Arthur walked next to Eames' side, taking in the beat-up man on the floor. There was no gag over his mouth, and blood spattered the ground around him. Eames was definitely talking to this man, to say the least.

"What have you found out, Eames?" Arthur asked, wiping his bloody hand across his sticky forehead. We're going to have fun getting out of here undetected, Arthur thought, taking in the various stains and smears that littered both their clothes, along with their disheveled appearances. Eames said something quietly in response, too quiet for Arthur to hear. "What did you say, Mr. Eames?" Arthur questioned, moving marginally closer. Maybe he was more injured than I thought.

"I said; he was here to kidnap you." Eames growled. The man flinched back as Eames twirled the knife in his hand. "He heard the fight between that arse owner and I." Eames looked over to Arthur, grave. "He thought I was you because that man called you Eames, repeatedly. He was supposed to take you back to Colin Jansen, where I presume you would have been tortured extensively and then murdered, in that order."

It wasn't like Eames to be this severe, they were both used to threats; that's all the dreamsharing world was. It was something they both dealt with daily, crazy hypnotists or not. "So what do we do with him?" Arthur asked. He would question Eames' about his abnormal behavior later.

"I was thinking -"

But Arthur didn't get to hear exactly what Eames was thinking, because that's when the front door was kicked open. Literally.

11. Chapter 11 - The Broken Door

Chapter 11: The Broken Door

Wood pieces were flying everywhere. They consumed Arthur's vision. So much for getting out of here undetected. Dodging the brunt of the door fragments, Arthur once again instinctively reached for his

weapon. Feeling the .22 and not his Glock, Arthur instead rummaged through the depths of Eames' suit jacket. Arthur felt something warm pulling at the back of his shirt, but he ignored it once more, managing to grab a handgun before the door was completely obliterated.

It all happened in a second. The man burst through the entryway, and Arthur steadied his gun, taking aim. I can handle one man, Arthur thought fleetingly. Then he saw the bullet proof vest, SWAT helmet, and the AK-47. Full tactical gear. Never mind, we're screwed.

Shoving his hand into his pocket, Arthur grabbed the black detonation box and pulled it out. Thumbing the control labeled "FRONT DOORWAY", Arthur tried to make eye contact with Eames across the room. If they were going to die, Arthur preferred it to be on their own terms.

But Eames wasn't looking at Arthur. He stood frozen in place. He had traded his kitchen knife for a raised gun, Arthur's Glock. His head was cocked to the side, and the firearm was slowly lowering from its position in his hand.

Arthur's pose was similarly still, except his stance was situated more for a last stand than surrendering, as Eames' response suggested. Eames, what the hell are you doing?

"Bloody hell, Eames." A muffled voice, decidedly British, sounded behind the tactical helmet. "This is not the scene I was expecting. Less like Independence Day and more like a bad night at the pub." The man shouldered his AK-47, freeing his gloved hands. In the charged silence following his pronouncement, the man removed his helmet.

Brown curls sprang free of their confines, and the man immediately leveled his gaze at Arthur, evaluating, pulling the strapped AK-47 off his back once more. "There must be something I'm missing here, Eames. Because if this man is the threat you rang me for, either he's invincible or you've gone soft." The man looked around, noticing the tied captive. "It looks like you've stopped one. Why not another?"

"No, no, no." Eames was hurried but reassuring. He gestured towards Arthur to lower his weapon. "The queen didn't forget the parking brake today, David." Arthur's brain processed Eames' statement and its odd wording. Definitely some kind of code, he decided. "David, this is Arthur," Eames waved towards Arthur, continuing, like they had all just bumped into each other in a coffee shop. The man tied to the floor followed Eames' gesture as well. He hadn't spoken during the whole exchange, but at the mention of Arthur's name, glared towards him.

Switching his attention once Eames mentioned his name, Arthur regarded the other man, David, guardedly. Arthur's handgun was still firmly aimed at the man's torso. David returned the inspection with renewed interest, looking over Arthur's figure critically. "You're Arthur." David said finally, making the statement sound more like a question than a fact. He seemed oblivious to the person-shaped hole he had left in the door, leaving the occupants exposed to the street as he moved further in the cafÃ©. "I thought you would beâ€¦ taller, mate," David said, eyeing Arthur up and down. His head swung back

over to Eames. "This is the same one that has saved your arse numerous times, correct?"

Eames looked uncharacteristically uncomfortable. "I've helped him a fair bit too, David. The man did get shot last week. That's why I'm in this bloody mess â€“ he royally pissed off a client and we came for answers. Speaking of which â€“ why are you here?"

"Why am I here?" David sidestepped around the three men, examining the scene. He picked up a fallen coffee pot, setting it back on the counter. "Didn't you send the SOS?" He questioned, slinging the automatic rifle over his shoulder again. He bent down, retrieving Eames' Heckler & Koch from where it had fallen between a table leg and the floor.

"SOS?" Eames inquired, puzzled.

"Eddie sent the signal," Arthur interjected, speaking for the first time. He holstered his gun resignedly, realizing that he wasn't going to receive the green light to shoot this armed man in the near future. Pity. "He's in the stock room somewhere. Panicked, almost tried to shoot me with this," Arthur said to Eames, gesturing to the .22 caught between waistband.

"Tried to shoot you? How is it I didn't notice this?" Eames asked, frustrated. At the beginning of Arthur's reply, Eames held a finger up. He shoved the Glock away to stuff a napkin into the tied man's mouth, as he had begun opening it to interrupt. Appeased, Eames then scooped the knife off the floor, waving it threateningly in front of the man's face before standing back up fully, returning to the conversation.

At this point, David placed the AK-47 on a nearby table, still walking around. Arthur moved as well, following a few paces behind him distrustfully. Moving into the hallway where the bathroom was located, David slid away the chair Arthur had propped up against the handle. He then swung the door open wide, revealing a bound and very pissed off woman. "Hello, there, sweetheart," David said, snatching back his grip on the door handle in mild surprise.

"And how did I miss that?!" Eames exclaimed, his voice rising higher as he took in the gagged woman.

"You were fighting," Arthur explained reasonably, moving in front of David to drag the woman out. "Let's continue this conversation somewhere else," Arthur said, handing the rifle back to David, while noticing disapprovingly that the safety was off. "I hardly think we can just stroll out, now that your friend, Mr. Eames, broke through the door so inconspicuously."

"Actually," David began, "I think we can do just that, mate." He started moving again, heading farther back into the shop - where Eddie was hiding.

Arthur ignored David's nonsensical comment. He dropped the woman next to her bound partner by the front door, but out of view. Arthur gestured for Eames to follow him in tailing David back to where Eddie was.

"Let me tie her up for transport first, Arthur," Eames said. "I'll

meet you back there. As much as it pains me to say it, don't let David kill Eddie. We're in enough of a mess as it is." Arthur nodded his affirmative, already moving towards David's retreating back.

Eddie doesn't deserve any worse of a day, Arthur thought, no matter how much I wanted to kill him for that SOS call.

Jogging back, Arthur burst into the cramped stock room behind David. He took in Eddie's raised hands and shaking body in the corner. "You look ready to piss yourself," David remarked, jerking his hand in a movement that commanded Eddie to stand up. "I take it that you're the scared shitless owner that placed the unnecessary SOS call?"

Arthur pushed past David, grabbing one of Eddie's hands. He unceremoniously hauled him to his feet, saying, "Let's go out here, Eddie." Arthur tried to project a sense of safety to the jittery barista, keeping his body between him and David. Eventually, the three of them made their way back into the main room, where the tied man was furiously trying to wrestle free of his knots. The woman, on the other hand, sat wearily, staring dully at the floor as Eames tied her feet together.

Arthur guided Eddie back to one of the bar stools, finding one not saturated with spilled coffee. "What were you saying about being 'undetected'?" Arthur asked David skeptically. David was lounging insouciantly at one of the tables by the shuttered windows, his feet propped up on the wood. He had his gun in his lap, and was polishing a knife from his combat belt absentmindedly with the edge of his shirt.

"Eames and I made a pact years ago, to help each other if the need ever arose," David said, not looking up from his grip on his black shirt. "So, I acquired, you could say, these radios for us to communicate. But a few months ago, some Asian man approached me saying he was Eames' friend. He knew that we had a deal going on." Eames moved from his spot on the floor to lean against the coffee shop counter, right next to where Arthur stood. "Apparently this bloke owed you something good, Eames, he claimed you did a job for him. But he gave me his business card, and said to call him if I ever found out you needed help."

"Saito," Arthur breathed to Eames.

"So," David continued, slipping his newly polished knife back into his belt. "I called him after receiving the SOS, when I was looking for a cabbie to get me over here, quick. I had barely spit out a few words about the situation before this posh-looking car came screeching to a stop in front of me. He already knew where you were, it seemed, and dropped me off a block from here." Arthur shook his head in amazement at Saito's influence. It seemed the man was inescapable. Although I never imagined he would be keeping tabs on us like that, Arthur thought, puzzled. I didn't think the man cared about anything but the success of his business ventures.

"But how could he get us all out of here without being arrested, David?" Eames asked. "That man never does anything by halves, but I doubt he can magically fly us out of here."

"No," Arthur said, catching on to where David's tale was heading. "But I bet he can bribe enough people to erase security footage, and maybe even afford a decent cleanup crew." David shot an approving

sort of frown Arthur's way.

"Not bad," David said, impressed, swinging his black boots to the floor with a clunk. "He said he could take care of the mess, although Eames would owe him, whatever that means." David rose from his seat, placing two hands on the back of his utility belt, stretching out his back. "I'll grab my helmet, and one of you can swing the vehicle around to the back entrance. If any bystander sees anything, I have a license to be an Authorised Firearms Officer. I can say our two friends are terrorists. As long as no one gets too close, they won't see that it's forged."

"I assumed Saito said he would handle the police, as well?" Arthur asked, walking over to help Eames tie the man's legs, and release him from the beam.

"Something like that," David said, slipping his visored helmet back on. "Do we need to take care of him?" David asked, jerking one gloved hand towards Eddie. "Or can he be paid off?"

Arthur, under no illusions about what 'taken care of' meant, quickly said, "He'll be fine," before Eddie could stutter anything out.

Are you positive we can we trust this guy?" Arthur said quietly to Eames, both of them still bent over the man. "He seemsâ€œ unpredictable."

"I'm sure," Eames stated quietly, climbing back to his feet. And then, louder, "We're ready, David. I'll get the car. It'll take a few minutes with traffic, so stand by the door and look official," Eames directed. With one last nod at Arthur, Eames then slipped out of the broken front door, keys in hand. David followed behind him, stopping to stand in front of the hole, back to the outside.

Arthur treaded over to swipe Eames' suit jacket off the floor, wincing as he did so. David noticed, glancing over from his place by the entryway. "When were you going to let Eames know that your stitches tore?" He questioned, fingering his rifle.

Arthur's eyebrow rose, and Eddie gasped behind him, obviously noticing for the first time the way Arthur's shirt stuck to his back in reddened clumps. Arthur, unruffled, looked appraisingly at the combat-ready man. He had made the realization only seconds before the comment. "You're more observant than you seem," Arthur said neutrally, slipping the suit jacket on.

"I don't know whether that was a compliment or not, but I'll take it," David replied. "I can see why Eames works with you - he likes the ones with staying power." Arthur chose not to reply, walking back over to the bar stools.

"I'm sure our friend will be over soon to clean all of this up," Arthur began to Eddie, gesturing towards the mess that the cafÃ© had become. "But we're taking you at your word that you won't mention any of this. We really can't have this getting out." Eddie began to nod frantically in agreement. "And if it does - " Here Arthur paused, his tone turning more professional, steely. " â€œ you really don't want to see me again."

"I â€œ I understand, Arthur." Eddie was still in shock, but managed

to speak.

Arthur clapped him on the shoulder lightly, now hyper aware of the strain in his shoulders. "I'm sorry that we couldn't have met in separate circumstances," Arthur said truthfully, slipping away from Eddie. "I need to go into the bathroom for a minute," Arthur called to David. "Try not to kill any civilians while I'm gone."

Arthur walked over to the stock room collecting the things he needed before heading into the toilets, flicking the light on. An overwhelming sense of dÃ©jÃ vu crashed over Arthur. He sighed, shrugging out of his jacket. Peeling off the white dress shirt, Arthur noted the way the sleeve clung to his left arm, the fabric still damp with brown coffee stains. His skin was still overly pink and tender underneath, evidence of a first-degree burn.

Not bothering to catalog the extent of the damage re-inflicted to his back, Arthur slapped a white pad over the wound, before winding gauze around it. Good for now, he thought, and reluctantly buttoned up his dirty shirt before slipping back on the suit jacket.

Going back into the hallway, Arthur saw that David had dragged both captives to the back of the shop, near the rear door. "Eames should be here any minute," David said, as though Arthur had never left the vicinity.

"I'll go check," Arthur volunteered. He went to the rear door and pushed it open, surprised at how heavy the plain grey metal was.

Arthur poked his head outside, gazing around. Behind the cafÃ© was an alley that ran the entire block of shops, with dumpsters and trash bags scattered around the wet ground. The backs of the buildings were plain, except for the occasional fire escape. No windows were apparent, oddly enough. Arthur judged that there was definitely enough space to drive the Land Rover through. Satisfied, Arthur was about to swing his head back in, but noticed something black protruding from the adjacent rooftop. Squinting, Arthur tilted his head up to better assess the mysterious cylindrical object. He barely managed to jerk his body back in reflex when heard the telltale pop. "Shit!" Arthur said, the door banging shut in front of him.

"Was that gunfire?" David asked, springing forward, AK-47 in hand.

"Yes," said Arthur, surprisingly calm for someone who had just come this close to being shot. Again. "Our captives apparently have some friends left over, one being a sniper on the rooftop."

"This man really wants you dead, yeah?" David asked rhetorically, moving next to the captives. "Let's just ask - "

"What?" Arthur asked, coming over to join him. He stopped as soon as he saw the reason for the interruption.

The men stood in silence side by side, Arthur in his weathered suit and David in his combat gear, staring down at their male captive. He was slumped against the wall. The bullet meant for Arthur had barreled farther into the shop after missing its intended target,

only to be blocked by another obstacle â€“ their hostage. Who was now bleeding out onto the tiled floor.

12. Chapter 12 - Dream A Little Bigger

Chapter 12: Dream A Little Bigger

The act of observing - a tic, a trigger. It was an old habit from his time in the military. Or maybe from being a point man for so long. He didn't really know. He observed everything, and it saved his life on many occasion, this being one of them. If he hadn't paid attention today, Arthur would be the one bleeding out onto the cold floor.

"Well, fuck me in the arse." In just one sentence, David summed up how Arthur felt about their current situation.

They stared at the ragged hole marring the front of the nameless man's shirt. The fabric was quickly becoming saturated, turning ominously dark with blood. Arthur was the first to react, lurching away suddenly, trying to find something with which he could put pressure on the wound. Jogging back with an apron in hand, Arthur watched David swiftly cut off the man's shirt with his newly polished knife.

As soon as the cloth was completely removed, Arthur knelt down. He paused with the apron in hand, not yet applying pressure. "That's tough luck, mate," David remarked. Arthur was inclined to agree with him. The bullet had penetrated a little off the middle of the man's torso, near his left pectoral. And unlike Arthur's injury, which had been situated high enough for repair; this man's wound was deeper â€“ centimeters from his heart.

"He's going to be dead before we get into the car," Arthur said, disappointed. He stood back up, apron forgotten on the ground. Even Arthur, who understood just how important this man could be to the operation, knew a lost cause when he saw one. "We'll leave him here," Arthur decided, moving away from the man. Out of courtesy, he dragged the woman out from behind the other captive. Arthur might be cold, but he wasn't oblivious. He wouldn't fancy being bled on by a mortally wounded comrade.

"How important is this man to your operation?" Arthur demanded, ripping the gag out of the woman's mouth. He needed to know fast - they could theoretically bring the man and pretend to have him alive. If he was important, that is.

The woman coughed violently once the cloth was torn from her mouth. She continued to hack for a few more seconds, choking on her suddenly unobstructed airway. David shifted impatiently next to Arthur, obviously thinking about the threat waiting just on the other side of the metal door. "Well?" David commanded, nudging her with his AK-47. "Tell us what you know!"

"Geeve me a second, alvight?" She protested. Finally, her body stopped shaking. "I've already told you, I haf nothing to tell you. I'm not with dis man," the woman spat, jerking her head towards the other bleeding captive. "I am Hans' wife and I can tell you - " Arthur had heard enough. He didn't have time for this, for people to

try to manipulate his emotions by bringing his dead coworker into this.

Bending down once more, Arthur roughly stuffed the gag back into the woman's mouth. He stood still next to David, quickly brainstorming options in his head. Nothing was looking good._Alright. Breathe. If I was in the car, how would Eames plan to get my attention?_

"Alright, you know London better than me," Arthur said to David, ignoring the woman's muffled protests through her gag. "How long would it take Eames to maneuver down the street, up the main route, and loop back into this alley?"

"Well," David began. "It's a right pain to get through these narrow touristy roads on a weekend like this, and this street is right near that art gallery. You know the one, that place all of the pretentious blokes go to in their spare time?" Arthur stared at him in silence, urging him to get to the point. David, continued, unhurried, "Maybe fifteen minutes? Twenty, about, if South Street has all of those damn hawkers - which I assume they do, seeing as how it's prime time for the tourists."

Arthur tried to calculate how much time they'd wasted already, just standing here. "Hypothetically, if one of us tried to catch up with him, do you think we could stop Eames before he drives into the alley? Which is a one-way death trap, considering the sniper."

"I don't see how your car could go faster than his in this traffic," David answered, puzzled. "On top of that, mate, you'd have to be mental to leave this shop after all this racket we've made."

Arthur was already moving by the time David finished, taking out the detonation remote from his pants pocket. He slipped it into the front pocket of his suit jacket. "We need to get to the front of the shop," Arthur said abruptly, motioning for David to bring the woman."Let's go." Without waiting to see if David was following, Arthur turned and walked away.

Eddie was bent over cleaning the counter as Arthur came back into the front of the shop. He looked up in surprise at Arthur's return. "I thought you were leaving, Ar - "

"Not now Eddie," Arthur said, cutting him off brusquely. "Do you have alcohol in here? Some extra oil for the burners, maybe?"

Eddie stared at Arthur for a moment, nonplussed.

"I have extra petrol in case I ever needed it," Eddie replied slowly, after a moment. His gaze shifted over Arthur's shoulder as David came back in, dragging the woman with him. "Is there something wrong? Where's the other bloke your boyfriend tied up?" Arthur didn't bother correcting Eddie about his 'boyfriend'. He was too focused on the mention of petrol.

What is Eames to me, anyways? I definitely can't call him just a colleague anymoreâ€¦ he saw me in my boxer briefs. Ugh. Focus.

"Where's the petrol, Eddie?" Arthur demanded.

"Right in the stockroom, by the door. Why - " But Arthur was already gone, striding into the back. _Thirteen minutes left to get Eames' attention - at most._He ducked into the other part of building, sidestepping the expanding pool that was forming around the slumped man on the floor.

Scooping up the canister from the edge of the stock room, Arthur jogged back to the front of the store. Spying a small refrigerator, Arthur swung open the door, taking two glasses of Coca-Cola out. Twisting both caps off, he impatiently turned the drinks upside down. The fizzy liquid splashed out onto the floor. "What are you - " Eddie began again, but this time was shushed by David, who was watching Arthur with keen contemplation.

Arthur placed the now-empty bottles onto one of the few caf  table left undamaged. He could feel three sets of eyes on him as he left once more, knocking open the door to the toilets.

_Now, where's that handgun Eames mentioned?_Arthur felt the edges of the mirror, his fingers skating over the cool walls. One of his nails caught on something near the bottom, and he stopped, his healing left hand closing around a familiar grip. Tugging, his searches revealed the hidden silenced firearm. _I'm glad Eames apparently has some foresight._

Arthur had accidentally opened the hinged back of the mirror while removing the handgun. A label caught Arthur's eye. _Finally, some luck._ Arthur snatched the bottle labeled 'Rubbing Alcohol' off the shelf, leaving the mirror open as he paced back into the main room.

"Here," Arthur called mid-stride, tossing the firearm into the air. David caught the weapon out of its smooth arc, twirling it experimentally while examining the silencer.

"Thanks, mate," David said, slingng his AK-47 over his shoulder once more.

Twelve minutes, Arthur thought, edgy. He opened the can of petrol, pouring some into the Coca-Cola glasses. Stopping when the bottles were three quarters full, Arthur came over next to Eddie, snatching his apron from off the counter. "I'll repay this too," Arthur said apologetically over his shoulder, gesturing impatiently for David's knife. Distractedly, David handed the weapon over, preoccupied by his new handgun.

Arthur made quick work of tearing the apron into shreds, stuffing the pieces into the necks of the bottles. Satisfied with his handiwork, Arthur poured rest of the rubbing alcohol onto the strips. He handed the knife hilt-first back to David, reaching into Eames' suit jacket. Arthur felt the outline of a lighter, in the same place where he had felt it earlier. _Eames, if I survive this, I might actually admit to you that you're not as dumb as I thought._

"This is how it's going to go," Arthur began, spinning to face David."I expect a few people waiting outside for us, friendly or not - on foot, in vehicles, you name it. I assume they let Eames go because he's not the man they're after " which is me, that is. Or maybe they did catch him and he's being tortured in the back of a car right now.

"I hope not. Regardless, when I go out the front door -" here Eddie made a noise of complaint, and David uttered a grunt of disapproval, "â€œ there are going to be people after me. Hopefully not going for kidnapping, not murder, but we don't know. That's why we're going to distract them." Arthur reached into his breast pocket, pulling out the remote. He nodded towards David. "You're going to cover me as I go out the front. Knowing Colin, he paid top dollar for a man on top of the building.

"I saw a motorcycle parked next to this shop as we came in, and the glare at the bottom of those curtains -" Arthur jerked his jaw towards the blinds on his right, "â€œ suggests it's still there. It's going to take time to hot wire it. So to buy that time and make a distraction, and hopefully signal Eames to circle the block - " Arthur held up the blast remote, his finger hovering over 'BACK DOORWAY', " - we're blowing up the cafÃ©."

Eddie slumped to the floor, head in his hands.

David grinned. "You're bloody mental, mate."

"No," said Arthur, snatching up the two bottles in one hand. "I was once told by someone that I need to dream a little bigger." Time to ignite some Molotov cocktails. "I'm just following their advice."

Eleven minutes.

That's all Arthur estimated he had before Eames would arrive at the alley behind the shop. If Eames went back there, he would be dead, killed by the sniper. And if Eames died, as far as Arthur was concerned, that meant they were all screwed too. Not to mention I would feel guilty for dragging him into all of thisâ€œ! Please notice something's wrong, Eames.

Feeling the time slipping away, Arthur quickly explained his plan to David. Eddie listened in the background, messy counter forgotten.

Against Arthur's original plan, Eddie piped up, volunteering to go outside first. He claimed that he would be less inconspicuous than David going to scout - and while Arthur couldn't disagree with that, he harbored doubts about the safety of that plan. Jansen's men would hurt anyone to get to Arthur.

Arthur told Eddie as much. Against Arthur's hopes, it just seemed to rile the blond-haired man up even more.

"You've gotten me into this whole mess, Arthur," Eddie argued, running his hand through his undercut agitatedly. "I'm stuck. And while I'm not a huge fan of the company you keep, I'm still convinced that you're an alright sort of bloke." Eddie stepped closer to Arthur, who was not persuaded. "If I can use the excuse of taking out the rubbish to look for snipers, I want to bloody do it." Eddie crossed his arms defensively in front of him, point made. Arthur back gave a sympathetic twinge of pain looking at the motion.

Nothing good ever happens when we stray from the plan. "Fine." Arthur snapped. "We don't have the time to argue. Here, Eddie."

Arthur shoved the trash bin at him from behind the counter, as well as a comms unit he had found in Eames' jacket. Arthur had the matching one in his ear. The situation felt eerily similar to the CurrencyCorp job to Arthur - except nothing like it at all. _I'm trusting an unarmed, untrained, ignorant civilian with espionage tech, in front of assassins no less. If only Eames could see me now._

"Time to go outside," Arthur said briskly. "David, at my signal, get on the roof. I'll be climbing out the side window now, and you'll follow after me."

And that was it.

Broken bits of glass tinkling, Eddie was whistling a surprisingly cheerful tune as he ducked out the destroyed front door. By the time both of his legs had reached through the other side of the hole, no living person was left in his cafÃ©.

Arthur and David had already dragged themselves out a window at the back of the stock room, previously covered by boxes of styrofoam cups. David levered their captive out after them, cutting the bonds off her legs and hands. He looked at her. "Any funny business and I strangle you with Arthur's tie," David muttered. "Good luck mate," he whispered, turning to Arthur, clapping a hand onto his shoulder. Arthur flinched in pain. "Sorry," David hissed, retracting his hand quickly. With a final wave, David began his ascent of the fire escape, handgun pointed at the woman in front of him. Arthur rubbed his shoulder as he watched them leave.

As soon as David began the climb, Arthur started counting in his head. _1, 2, 3, 4â€¢_ it would take them another two minutes to get on the roof and toward the front - far enough to be out of the blast zone. _8 minutes until Eames reaches the alley._Arthur was quickly running out of time. _24, 25, 26â€¢_

"'Ello. Wh-what am I doing? Carrying the rubbish out, that's all." Arthur jumped a little as Eddie's voice suddenly sounded in his ear, too loud and very nervous. _Shit. Who's talking to Eddie now?_

Arthur inched forward in the narrow alley that bracketed Eddie's cafÃ© and a bookstore. Arthur could faintly hear another voice in his earpiece, too far away from Eddie's microphone to be decipherable. "There was a break in this morning," Eddie was saying. "No, the perpetrators left before I could do anything. They were fighting over - "

And that was when Arthur pressed the button.

The horrendously loud sound of shattering brick, mortar and glass penetrated the normal atmosphere of the London side street. The explosion's blast flung Arthur's body forward like he was made of paper. He landed hard on his chest and knees, arms flung out in front of him to preserve the petrol-filled bottles. Arthur's ears were ringing, his head pounding. He rose unsteadily to his feet, clumps of cement falling off the back his suit jacket. Creeping forward to the edge of the alley, Arthur could distantly hear cars beginning to honk. _I hope Eames noticed that_. Nearing the edge of the buildings, Arthur paused to spit some blood that had pooled in his mouth, an

aftereffect of biting his tongue during the explosion. His only link to Eddie, the comms unit, had been ripped off his ear. It lay in the debris underneath Arthur's feet, cracked, broken - useless.

_I hope everyone's in position,_Arthur thought. He pulled out his gun, keeping it concealed under the tattered suit jacket. And then stepped out into the sunlight.

It was chaos.

At the very least, chaos for London.

Cars were stopped everywhere, passengers and drivers alike searching for the source of the explosion from the interior of their vehicles.

Standing at the lip of the alley, Arthur quickly noticed three things.

First, that Eddie was lingering by the trash on the other side of his shop- but not by choice. An intimidating man in an ill-fitting black suit was physically caging him in.

Second, Arthur could see the gawkers pointing up at Eddie's roof, presumably at someone. By their expressions, Arthur's guess was that it was David, looking official and menacing in his combat gear.

Well, I can only hope.

And, lastly, that Arthur could see other people, dressed in similar black professional clothing. He picked out at least five people looking a tad too alert, scanning their surroundings intensely as they walked along the shops. No one had seen Arthur yet - but it was only a matter of time.

Alright, Eddie. You just need to distract him a little longer. David will bail you outâ€¦ hopefully.

Arthur switched his gaze back to the curb in front of him, where, just as he predicted, a motorcycle was still parked. It gleamed an obnoxiously bright in the afternoon light.

Arthur strode fully out of the alley, keeping his head down, posture unassuming, even with the two Molotov cocktails swinging in one hand, the other cradling his gun inside his jacket. Miraculously, Arthur made it over to the red bike without any unwanted attention. He swung his leg over the leather seat, feeling tightness in the back of his shirt, the motion pulling at dried blood.

Slipping his hand off his gun, Arthur leaned forward to look at the motorcycle in front of him. He pried off the ignition cover, glancing up as he did so. The man talking to Eddie was suitably occupied, but one of the other men in black suits was making a pass back toward Arthur. _Shit._

Rapidly separating two red wires from the rest, Arthur disconnected the cables. Careful not to touch the ends of the bare wire, Arthur stripped them with a lockpick from his jacket. The man walking was seconds away. Locating the brown starter wire, Arthur felt a bead of sweat roll down his temple. He stripped it in the same manner as the other two. Glancing up once more, Arthur saw the second man stop next

to the first, interrogating Eddie.

Eddie, to his credit, kept a poker face as he spied Arthur over his shoulder. He motioned broadly back to his shop, drawing the men in.

A muffled crack sounded from roof, followed by a louder pop. The two men looked away from Eddie, their heads snapping up, but Arthur did the opposite, focusing more intensely on his task. That must be_ David - shooting at someone with the silenced gun._

Wires completely bare, Arthur took the lighter out of his pocket. _Here we go._ Striking the wires together, a spark flew off, followed by the roar of the motorcycle's engine as it came to life. Arthur revved the engine, keeping it going.

At the sound of the gunshots, the men had completely disregarded Eddie, looking for a way to scale the building. They jumped at the sound of the motorcycle's engine. "Fuck!" Arthur read one of their lips over the noise of the engine. "There he is!"

I'm going to die, Arthur thought suddenly. They're professionals - they're not going to miss at this distance._ Arthur moved his lighter under the cloth of one of the two bottles, but knew in his gut that he wouldn't be able to ignite them before he was shot.

Just as he was about to flick the lighter, accepting death, Eddie suddenly sprinted at the men, tackling from behind their unsuspecting forms. "GET AWAY, EDDIE!" Arthur shouted over the roar of the engine, his bottle aflame. Eddie barely managed to roll away from the scrambling men before the bottle left Arthur's hand, exploding on impact. Arthur didn't stick around to watch the cocktail hit its targets, gunning around a stationary Volvo.

The occupants, who had stopped to gape at the previous explosion, screamed as the Molotov cocktail hit, engulfing the men in a blazing inferno.

Arthur punched the gas once more, weaving in and out of oncoming traffic as the remaining bunch of Jansen's men yelled to each other. Another person, this time a man holding a Glock, fell to the ground as a shot echoed from the roof. A man took aim at Arthur, the barrel of his gun aimed for his chest. Arthur weaved, and the bullet narrowly missed his thigh, embedding itself into the metal frame of the bike. _Please don't hit the gas tank,_ Arthur thought feverently. _I think I'd rather get shot again than die in an explosion._

He kept his body as flat as he could, trying to become a harder target for the marksmen. More gunshots sounded from above. Hopefully that's David and not someone else._ Arthur guided the motorcycle across the lane of oncoming traffic, and jumped it onto the opposite sidewalk, sparks flying._

A _ping_sounded next to Arthur as a bullet ricocheted off a metal post next to him. He looked back, and saw the woman in black who had fired the shot. Still driving on the pavement, Arthur turned backwards on the bike, safety be damned. The woman fired again, blowing off a piece of the handlebar, centimeters from where Arthur's hand rested. Arthur aimed back at her and squeezed the trigger. The woman stumbled backwards as the bullet clipped her side.

Whipping back around, Arthur corrected his steering, narrowly avoiding a shrieking pedestrian in the process. He had reached the end of the sidewalk, bouncing off the curb and back into traffic. Cars honked angrily as Arthur accelerated once more. A gunshot sounded from behind him, close once again, and Arthur glanced over his shoulder to see a black vehicle four cars behind him, the passenger aiming a handgun out the window. Great. Arthur turned around to lose the car, and realized that the road was huge, spanning three lanes. Gridlock was everywhere.

Bracketing the traffic was a throng of vendors and tourists alike, the noise of humanity overpowering. Arthur cut across two lanes, and then past a cab. The driver laid on his horn. I'm never going to find Eames like this. Arthur zigzagged ahead through as many vehicles as he could, clipping someone's side mirror in the process. A policeman blew his whistle from his place at the next traffic light, running towards Arthur.

The light was changing, but Arthur carved around the corner anyway, the sleek bike tipping near horizontal to the ground. Making a quick decision, Arthur shouted a warning as he revved the bike back over the curb. He came to a screeching halt, startling a family of American tourists. "What the hell are you doing?!" the man in a baseball cap screamed.

Arthur unholstered his gun to check for his tail, and the man backed up, pulling at the back of the boy's shirt in front of him.

"Have the bike," Arthur offered graciously, throwing the motorcycle to the ground. He pushed past the frozen family, unlit Molotov cocktail in his other hand.

Thrusting himself into the crowd of people in front of him, Arthur twisted in between pedestrians, straining for a glimpse of the black car that had been tailing him.

He seemed to be alone.

Arthur had set up a rendezvous point a few streets away for David. He hoped the man managed to get out with their captive, and that the surviving hired guns either went after Arthur or were killed. There can't be an infinite number of them... right?

Walking up to another curb, Arthur realized he was parallel to the alley behind Eddie's shop. It was on his right, and as far as he could tell, unoccupied. The sniper was nowhere to be found on the roof. Now where's Eames? Arthur twisted around, scanning the sea of traffic. A horn blared to his left, and Arthur instinctively raised his gun.

A pair of elderly women gasped in front of Arthur, scuttling backwards. One of them dropped her handbag in surprise.

"Darling? What the bloody hell are you doing here?" Eames was leaning out the window, sporting his trademark smirk. His expression slipped as he spotted Arthur's gun. Arthur pushed past more tourists, watching them frantically dial 999. Great, now the police will be after us as well.

Arthur slid in next to the Eames, shutting the door behind him. "We need to go, now," he said. "Do you have more bullets?"

"In the glove box," Eames said, shifting the car into gear. "I parked over here after I saw the explosion in the alley. I had my suspicions, and they were confirmed when a man hurried out of there, carrying a rifle." At Arthur's look, Eames continued, "No, Arthur, I didn't get to question him. He ran like a bat out of hell. I assume you have a tail?"

"A black BMW, I think. I lost them minutes ago on a motorcycle, and the police are going to swarm this place any minute, Saito's influence aside. We need to get to the rendezvous point, find David."

"Alright," Eames said, executing a sloppy U-turn. "We'll take the back way. Jansen may be a rich little wanker, but he doesn't know this city like I do."

Arthur had to admit, he and Eames made a good team. En route to the rendezvous point, the black BMW managed to find them again. Eames cursed, because it meant they would have to ditch the Land Rover. Looking over at Arthur, he said simply, "Let's give them hell." Arthur rolled into the backseat, bringing the AR-15 out of its duffel bag. He handed Eames the last Molotov cocktail, along with Eames' jacket, directing him to the lighter. "You've been busy while I was gone, love," Eames remarked. Arthur ducked as a bullet shattered the back window. Glass fragments rained over his body, coating his injured back. Fantastic.

Eames grunted unhappily. "Ready, darling?" He eased up on the gas, coasting next to the other car.

Arthur was ready. Not wasting a second, he pulled the trigger, shattering his own window, and then the windows of the other vehicle. The gun continued to rapid fire, and Arthur ducked under the sill as he heard bullets fly back in response. Soon, it was quiet, and Eames accelerated once more. Metal crunched loudly into a building behind them.

"You're unhurt?" Arthur asked Eames, shoving the automatic rifle back into the bag. Glass clattered everywhere around him, littering the back of the car. Arthur shuddered to think of what the exterior of the Land Rover looked like. Riddled with bullet holes, probably.

"As always, darling," Eames said in response. "I am a little pissed I didn't get to use - " Eames cut off as Arthur was sliding back into the front seat. Eames stopped him, a hand on his back. Arthur flinched away involuntarily. "When did this happen?" Eames asked severely, motioning angrily towards Arthur's bloody back, evidence of his torn stitches.

"We need to leave this car," Arthur said in response, beginning to wipe fingerprints off the dashboard with the suit jacket. "Otherwise the MI6 will find my other identity for the U.K."

Eames sighed, pulling the car over to the side of the street. "We're talking about this. But right now, I'm going to use this Molotov to blow up my auto."

Idling by the pavement in a stolen Ford Fiesta, Arthur fidgeted next to Eames as they waited at the rendezvous point. Eames, being the petty friend that he was, was giving Arthur the silent treatment. He was annoyed that Arthur hadn't mentioned the resurfaced injury earlier.

Looking tattered and tired, David finally stepped out of the shadows, the dark-skinned woman walking next to him. She stepped into the back of the vehicle first, quickly followed by David, who let out a huge sigh as he slid into the interior.

Eames barely waited until David had most of his body inside, peeling away from the pavement. "Where are her bonds?" Eames snapped unhappily, staring into the rear view mirror. "Last time I checked, David, we usually hold our prisoners at gunpoint."

David was taking off his bulletproof vest, almost elbowing the woman across the head in the process. "Who got your knickers in a twist, mate? Cut me a break. She's fine."

"What do you mean?" Arthur asked in a much different tone, tuning in to the conversation. He had been drifting off again, the discomfort from his ripped stitches suddenly acute.

"Look." David reached forward, shoving a piece of crumpled parchment into Arthur's lap. "She gave this to me earlier - right, Andrea?" The woman nodded once, her curls a mess, looking exhausted. Some soot and other debris had made its way onto her light-colored coat, turning it grey.

Eames looked over at the note in Arthur's lap. "Open it, then," he said to Arthur, jerking the Fiesta around a turn with more force than strictly warranted.

Arthur steadied himself against the window, slowly unfolding the paper, his fingers clumsy. To his surprise, he recognized the barely legible letters as Hans' looping handwriting, or at least a good forgery of it. Blinking to focus his tired eyes, Arthur tried to decipher the script.

Arthur,

_Hallo, mein Freund. If you are reading this, I am dead. Or missing. I_kenne_know you are a smart man, and you will not believe without proof. But it is hard to talk to you from the_das_grave. But, be satisfied, Andrea is my wife and I give her this note for you. I am not one to be wasting with words. Listen to her. Don't shoot Andrea, Arthur, or I will find you._

You were best point man I ever worked with. A good man, as well.

**Paulaner**

Hans

Chapter 13: Priorities

"So you're really Hans' wife, then," Arthur concluded, peering up from the note to look at the woman. He felt hot embarrassment creep up the back of his neck, a reminder of how roughly they had treated her over the past day. The memory of Andrea graciously picking up the thermos flashed through Arthur's mind. I didn't notice her accent back then..._ Damn, I can't believe I knocked out Hans' wife._

"Just like that you're going to trust her?" Eames drawled, skepticism dripping in his tone. "I thought you were more cautious than that, Arthur. Anyone can forge a note, darling."

Clearly Eames is still angry with me,_ Arthur thought, puzzled and a little irritated. I don't think I've heard him say 'darling' quite that way before._

Arthur looked over at Eames, walling off his emotions with his usual tactic - condescension. "I know how to do my job, Eames. At the bottom of the note Hans left the name of an obscure beer that we drank - " when I drunkenly told him I wished you were our forger _ " one night. No one would've have known that particular brand and been able to replicate his handwriting like this. But, just to check - Andrea?" Arthur turned towards the woman in the backseat. David had fallen asleep with his arms crossed over his broad chest, his bulletproof vest squeezed between his leg and the Andrea's side.

"Ja_?" She answered quietly, shifting uncomfortably. Arthur reached back, dragging the offending vest off the seat and onto the floor. David snorted in his sleep, his head lolling in the direction of his window.

"Would you mind telling us about your husband? Just to - just to confirm who you are?" Arthur asked, keeping his tone gentle. He was still feeling the vestiges of guilt left behind from manhandling her.

Andrea cleared her throat, looking surprised at Arthur's query. While she paused, he took the opportunity to carefully slip Hans' note into his pants pocket.

"Hans..." She looked up at Arthur. "Vellâ€œ! he vas vunderful. Very big, strong too, but a nice bear at heart. He alvays cut his hair short, fery short, although I told him it looked beautiful long at our vedding. He worked with you for avhile, nicht_?" Arthur nodded solemnly. Tears began to well up Andrea's eyes. "He could talk - to everyone. He vas a charmer. Hans loved all kinds of beer, as you say, Arthur. But that's not, ehm, how you say - specific enough? Vellâ€œ! he must have mentioned football to you. Wouldn't miss a Bundesliga match for anyzing."

He mentioned some soccer teams during Jansen's dreamâ€œ! Arthur had his confirmation. He turned to snidely inform Eames, but the man was absorbed elsewhere. He was busy unearthing a crumpled napkin from the depths of his weapon-filled suit jacket. Eames handed it to the crying woman, still driving, and Arthur felt some of his animosity melt away. Andrea accepted the it gratefully, wiping her nose. "Vhere are we going to?" She asked.

"I'd like to know that too," David proclaimed loudly, suddenly jerking up from his crumpled position by the window. "I need to take a piss right quick. Been sniping bloody assassins on rooftops all day, I think I earned a pint or two of something."

Eames laughed, throwing his head back, some happiness returning to his stony countenance. "You're definitely the same bloke I remember in back the service, David. We'll be there eventually, and you'll get your pint. In fact!" Arthur's mind drifted off as Eames continued chattering. He settled back into the passenger seat of the small vehicle, and gazed out of the window at the passing scenery. The clouds reflected the meager sunset staining the sky, turning the horizon a dull pink. Darkness was quickly taking over, encouraging the heaviness in Arthur's limbs. Arthur leaned over to rest his head on cool glass of the Ford's window. I haven't eaten since breakfast, Arthur thought, his mind rewinding. It was hard to believe today was part of the same week that Eames had made tea at the cottage, never mind the same day. Not exactly following doctor's orders and resting, am I?

Arthur drifted for a long time, eventually letting his eyes flutter shut. I'll just close them for a few seconds...

"... with Arthur." Arthur stirred at the sound of his name. His eyelids gradually blinked open, and he removed his head gingerly from the window, rolling out a nasty crick in his neck. Turning his head to the left, Arthur's vision slowly focused, coming to rest upon Eames.

He was talking to someone quietly, his eyes flicking up occasionally to look the in rear view mirror. Arthur lazily looked up to the reflection. He saw David once again slumped in the back, a mark of condensation on the window as he drooled. Andrea was looking much more awake, laughing animatedly as she replied to whatever Eames had just said. No doubt a joke at my expense, Arthur thought wryly.

"We'll be there in about five minutes," Eames estimated, turning off onto a much bumpier road. The headlights of the stolen car barely reached a few meters out into the darkness. It seemed they were far away from any of the light that London had to offer. I must have closed my eyes for longer than I thought, Arthur realized unhappily.

"What's the plan?" Arthur asked Eames, going for a casual. His voice came out hoarse, unused.

Eames turned, leveling a look at Arthur that said I'm not fooled by your fake attentiveness, darling. "I was telling Andrea once we get set up at the bed and breakfast, David can give you a lift - back to my cottage. It's on the way to his flat anyway," Eames said smoothly.

"Und I vas informing Mister Eames that Hans worked with a sicherheit - security firm, I mean, een London," Andrea said from the back, sounding much more confident than earlier. "So, I vill stay und help him at das hotel, while David and you travel back to ze house."

"I need to get stuff from my flat, mate," David chimed in, once again snapping miraculously awake. "I'll swing by Eames' place. It's on the way," David finished. Everyone seemed satisfied, except for Arthur.
Where was I when they decided to join forces against me?

"Wait a moment," Arthur said, sitting up. Something crinkled under his shirt, and he remembered his makeshift bandage. He had slapped it on earlier in the day, but it was probably dirty and wet with blood by now. _I'll have to fix that. Later, though, when everything is sorted out._ "I still have to call Saito and describe to him the clean up job. With all that went on in London today, there's going to be a lot of security cameras to erase, not to mention people to be paid off. And who can forget the fact that there's bodies all around Eddie's shop - then the fallout for Eddie himself. We don't even know how the men tailed us to the city, Eames, and there needs to be a profile formulated on - "

Arthur's stressed ranting was drowned out by the guffaws of David. He leaned forward in the cramped quarters of the car, suddenly grinning wildly. "You're exactly the type A kind of bloke that Eames promised you were, aren't you mate?" David slapped the side of Arthur's seat. "No one's going to follow us out here, in the middle of bloody nowhere. And if they do, Arthur, we'll see them coming." David began to chortle again, quieter. "I'm pretty sure the only thing around us is mostly those buggerin' squirrels right now."

Andrea was a little more sympathetic than David, leaning forward to place a calming hand on Arthur's shoulder. "We'll be fine, Arthur. You can make calls and ze plan from Eames' house."

Eames tore his gaze away from the road, where he was busy navigating around potholes. "You know they're right, Arthur. I have plenty of supplies back at the house - you can still be a point man from there. Don't forget - you promised me you would go back tonight."

For a minute, the only sound was the whine of the Fiesta's tiny engine. "It seems everyone is in agreement then," Arthur said eventually, resigned. "I'll need to know where your laptop is, Eames. I'll need it to collect background on Jansen's men."

"Yes. We'll talk when we get out of this auto," Eames replied.

Arthur didn't like how Eames lingered on the word _talk_.

The Fiesta pulled up a long dirt driveway, headlights casting their beams onto a white house. Eames claimed the building was to be their hotel.

It definitely looks as though it's seen better days, Arthur thought, taking in the aged establishment. A lamp flickered on the front porch, attracting moths, reminding Arthur of the farmhouses from the movies.

Eames, looking the most normal out of the four of them, parked the car before striding up onto the porch. Arthur watched as an older woman answered the door, looking annoyed. Arthur read her lips, and got as far as _do you know how late it is_ before Eames shifted, obscuring his view. They stood by the entryway a moment more, and Arthur could see how the woman's posture gradually changed, becoming

more welcoming, relaxed. Eventually, the woman gestured to the open doorway, and Eames followed her inside, the front door closing behind them.

"How does that wanker do that?" David hissed from the back, whispering for once. Arthur assumed he was referring to the fact that Eames could con anyone into liking him.

"Mr. Eames is no doubt feeding her one of his signature sob stories," Arthur responded, settling back into the dark interior of the car, content to wait. _Keep talking to David,_ Arthur told himself. _You can't go back to sleep now._ "He always seems to involve his supposedly dying mother, no matter what country it is. Everyone goes for the dying mother."

Eventually, Eames reappeared, his hand closed around something. The woman stood at the doorway, waving to him as he slid back into the Ford. Eames waved back, smiling grandly.

Eames shut the driver's side door and turned over the engine, buckling his seatbelt. His exaggerated grin fell off his face. Taking in his apparent failure, his backseat passengers followed suit, buckling their belts as well. But Arthur looked over at him, confused. Eames raised an eyebrow teasingly, a smirk once again gracing his full lips. "Are you doubting my prowess, darling? Put on your belt. The better guest lodging is in another shack."

"I got us half the rooms in the other building," Eames said, making a U-turn to drive down another road. This makeshift path was even bumpier than the last, filled with divots. The jolts woke Arthur up even more, sharp pains coursing through his torso.

Their car bumped down to the end of the trail, and Eames cleared his throat, parking the muddy vehicle in front of a smaller structure. The red paint was flaking, and Arthur snorted as he recognized the house. _It look like we're staying in a converted barn_, Arthur thought, amused. "Ey, don't laugh," Eames said to Arthur, feigning hurt. "This was the upgrade. I told the owner about my poor ailing mother, who my fiancee and I are going to visit -" David and Andrea both started laughing, and Arthur had to hide a snicker of his own. "What?" Eames asked petulantly. "I thought it was a good cover."

"Nothing," David replied, still sniggering. "What are we doing now that we're finally here, besides me taking a piss?"

Eames turned off the engine. "Well, I'd skive off again soon, David, as soon as you help me unload all the luggage from the boot. Arthur and Andrea can make up the rooms together, it'll go faster."

Arthur rolled his eyes, knowing Eames' suggestion was an excuse to stop Arthur from exerting himself. But Andrea seemed to have formed an unspoken pact with Eames. Before Arthur knew it, she said, "That is _gut_, Eames, we will go," and he was being pulled from the car. Andrea was muttering something, having commanded a surprisingly tight hold onto his elbow.

"Don't forget to change the license plate, Eames!" Arthur called over his shoulder. He was dragged by Andrea through the darkness, towards the silhouette of the building. _If Andrea pulls any harder on my

forearm, I'm going to get yet another bruise._"Coming, coming," Arthur said, stumbling after the persistent Andrea.

Andrea already had grabbed the key from Eames, and with some fumbling, managed to open the Masterlock. She removed it from the hinged doorway and twisted the metal bit holding the door, swinging the gate outward. _Very classy,_Arthur thought sarcastically, taking the lock off the swinging door. He ran his fingers through his dirty hair once more, following Andrea through the entryway.

The room was quiet upon entering, and dark. Arthur supposed barns didn't usually have many windows. His eyes adjusted to the darkness, and he saw Andrea standing in the corner. He moved, ready to help, but was stopped by the sudden influx of light.

"I found ze switch," Andrea proclaimed unnecessarily. Hanging lamps alighted, illuminating their surroundings. Arthur and Andrea were standing in a large front room filled with couches, a desk, and an ancient TV. Arthur was mildly astonished that electricity reached out here.

Andrea and Arthur momentarily separated to look around. Andrea found the next light switch in the kitchen, and Arthur laid the lock on the counter. Andrea was unnaturally silent when they rejoined in the center of the kitchen. Meeting Arthur's questioning look, she moved even closer, herding him against the doorframe. She studied him intently. He let her do it, mildly uncomfortable. He could see the splash of freckles that danced across the bridge of her nose, a shade darker than her brown skin, such a contrast to Arthur's own.

"What is it, Andrea?" He asked uneasily, palms braced against the wood behind him. _Was she going to get revenge for earlier? What if the note was faked? Damn, I would never hear the end of it from Eamesâ€|_

"You are stupid," she declared matter-of-factly, backing away. She shook her head, as though Arthur had disappointed her. Arthur stared dumbly, feeling whiplash at her change in mood. _She was just laughing in the car earlier with Eames! Does she blame me for Hans' death?_"Come help me get ze beds ready upzairs," Andrea said, as though nothing was amiss. She pointed to the rickety steps, moving. Arthur followed her, still flummoxed.

They walked into the first bedroom on the next landing, a small space with pale blue walls. She went over to the unmade bed, taking up one of the sheets that was folded neatly at the end. Taking ahold of it, she shook it out harder than necessary, motioning for Arthur to help. He caught an end of the floating blanket and moved to the opposite side of the mattress. The low tones of Eames and David's voices echoed as they entered downstairs, dropping something heavy to the floor. Their voices faded as they exited again.

Andrea snapped the sheets, folding them forcefully under her part of the mattress. Arthur mechanically copied her movements, aware of his tender back. The bed making was another ingrained habit from the military, yet as mindless as it was, he couldn't unpuzzle the tension behind her movements. _Is she angry with me as well?_

"What have I done?" Arthur questioned. He was tired, and his back hurt. Drama never really suited him. _Yet it seems I've been

receiving more than my fair share, lately._

"You don't see it," Andrea said, looking up at Arthur as she layered another blanket. "He looks at you ze way Hans looked at _me_and - " She broke off. "You are, how you say, blind? Both of you."

"Blind to _what_?" Arthur asked, stuffing the blanket into a hospital corner on his side.

Andrea sighed, absentmindedly patting down some of her curls. "You are a good man, Arthur. I am glad dat Hans vorked with you."

Arthur felt a frisson of dÃ©jÃ vu work through his veins at the praise. _The same phrase that Hans said to me in his note._ "Thanks you, Andrea," Arthur said slowly. "I only regret I didn't get to know you better, except for the fact that I knocked you unconscious."

"Do not say talk like that!" Andrea declared passionately, throwing a pillow onto the bed. "You are not dead, or dying. Ve vill speak more in die future, _ja_?"

"Well, but I'm leaving tonight and - "

"You vill rest and come back, notzing else, alright? No more bullets. Eames told me all about vhat happened on ze way over here." Andrea walked, stopping in front of Arthur. She looked at him again, but her irritation was replaced with concern. She walked around him once more, the ghost of her fingertips trailing over his blood-stained back.

"When did Eames talk to you without me?" Arthur asked, puzzled. Andrea didn't answer right away, straightening the cuffs on his shirt. Arthur thought it was rather useless, seeing as how one arm was ruined by coffee, but he let her hover anyways.

Andrea rolled her eyes, her curls bouncing with the movement. "You and David vere asleeping almost ze whole ride, Arthur. Eames talked a lot about ze past couple days."

"I was?" Arthur questioned in surprise, glancing down at Andrea. A lock of hair escaped onto his forehead. "Wait - he talked about last week?"

Rough footsteps sounded on the stairway, skidding to a halt in the doorway of the room. It was David, dressed in a plain navy jumper and dark pants.

"I've found clean trousers!" He exclaimed cheerfully. "Ready to hit the road, mate?" David asked Arthur. He paused, eyebrows furrowing as he took in Andrea's annoyed expression. "I'm not interrupting something, am I?"

"No," said Andrea, the same time Arthur said yes. Andrea rolled her eyes.

"Zis is fine," Andrea said. "Go, Arthur." Arthur hesitated at his place at the side of the bed, the last duvet still in hand. Andrea impatiently rushed over to take it out of his hands, smoothing it out quickly. Turning, she embraced Arthur in a light hug. "_Bitte_, Arthur, don't do anyzing too dumb." She released him, stepping back.

"I can see vhy Hans told me so much about you."

"Thanks, Andrea," Arthur said sincerely.

"Alright," said David, clapping his hands together. "Let's 'get this show on the road', as you Yanks say." Arthur followed David down the stairway, his feet creaking on the wooden steps. Eames was waiting for the pair at the bottom, his slicked back hair finally looking as though it was ready to come undone. We all need a shower. Arthur thought. A break. Some alcohol sounds nice, as well. I think I left bottle of Perignon at the apartment in France. A pity.

Eames was talking to David, while Arthur's mind once again drifted off. "... don't mind if I talk to him for a mo'?"

"I'll start the engine," sighed David, and was gone.

That left Arthur and Eames standing in the dim light of the kitchen, alone. They faced each other, silent. Arthur fiddled with the ruined cuff of his sleeve, and Eames pulled at the fabric of his silk shirt.

"At least you're not wearing that horrid paisley thing you had on the other day," Arthur said.

"It's not like I could," Eames retorted, a small smile on his lips. "Your bloody hand ruined that brilliant piece of my wardrobe."

"Brilliant?" Arthur questioned, holding back a laugh. "All those years in SAS deprive you of gaining a sense of fashion?"

"No," Eames said. "Cheeky. Although you know as well as I that those years were more bullets than blazers." Eames halted in their usual banter, his frown from earlier returning. "That's what I wanted to talk about. The bullet wound." Arthur shifted uncomfortably, eyeing the way to the car behind Eames.

"What's there to talk about?"

"Do you remember that job in New York?" Eames asked, not answering Arthur.

"Of course I do, Eames, you know that," Arthur said quietly. "That was the last one with Mal."

"And with Smith, that chemist. He had the levels for his Somnacin wrong, and you, the lightweight, were vomiting into the loo for days after."

Arthur winced at the memory. "I remember that well, Eames. I was the one throwing up, you know. I don't see your point."

"My point, Arthur, is that Mal threatened Smith - she was so protective of you. She was livid that you became ill," Eames smiled, reminiscing. "If I recall correctly, her exact wording was to 'string him up by the hair of his balls'." Arthur lips twitched, the memory surfacing in his mind as well. "And I just - " Eames' voice broke, and he stepped closer, bridging the awkward gap between them. Arthur took in the way Eames' eyes looked soft under the low light, the way

his eyelashes cast shadows over his tan skin. Eames' lips parted. He licked his lips, his tongue red. Arthur inhaled, air filling his lungs uncomfortably tight. He could almost imagine that he could feel the heat radiating off of Eames, they were so close. Arthur reached out, laying a steady hand on Eames' forearm. Maybe it was his time to say something, for once.

"ARE WE LEAVING OR DO I HAVE TO SUMMON THE BLOODY _QUEEN_TO DELIVER AN ENGRAVED INVITATION?"

Arthur and Eames jumped back at David's shouting, startled. "I should go," Arthur murmured, the moment broken.

"Here," Eames went over to the kitchen table, fumbling into his bag. "This is the key for the house. Your Glock. And this is an extra encrypted cell phone. All the new specs are on it, you'll be able to contact me from wherever." Arthur accepted the items gratefully, slipping his gun back into his waistband.

"You'll pick up this time?" Arthur asked, walking towards the door.

"You've become my number one priority," Eames said, his trademark smirk returning. "Like it or not."

The car ride felt unbearably long. David and Arthur exchanged occasional remarks, but both were too tired to make meaningful conversation.

Halfway through, the silence became too oppressive for David. He expressed his appreciation for the handgun Arthur gave him earlier. Arthur mentioned the breakthroughs gun companies were having in making quieter silencers. "Only a matter of time before you can shoot someone and have it sound like a buzzing fly," David predicted. "Although," David raised an eyebrow interestedly, his tone changing. "I heard that you assassinated a Chechnian once with a rolled up magazine and a broken umbrella." David glanced sideway at Arthur. "That's hardcore, mate."

"It was a phone book."

David nodded appreciatively, humming along with the pop tune on the radio. "Remind me to stay friends with you, Arthur."

It had been a long day, even by Arthur's standards. He was relieved when David finally pulled the car up to the driveway of the cottage.

"Here we are," David said, shutting the engine off. He looked over at Arthur, a new respect showing on his face. "Be on the lookout for Charlies, mate. Now that we know Jansen's people are targeting you, we know you're going to get bombarded by hired killers."

"I will," Arthur promised, already scanning the perimeter for anything out of the ordinary. The ugly gnome was back in place, meaning the various trip wires and alarms Eames had scattered all over the property had stayed intact. The house itself looked quiet, devoid of any activity.

"Do you want a scout?" David asked. "I know you slapped that bandage

on your back - but Eames warned me you're one of those blokes that doesn't admit to pain."

Arthur smiled, the corners not quite reaching his eyes. "I'm fine, thank you David. Mr. Eames seems to be under the assumption lately that I'm as fragile as china." He adjusted his ruined shirt, the fabric chafing at his burned arm. I just need sleep and a shower. Not necessarily in that order.

David scrutinized Arthur, his expression serious. "Eames has never overtly expressed much worry for those around him, you know that mate? Even in SAS, bloody hell, Eames was the most annoyingly loyal arse you could meet, really. But he never showed it much, except during pranks. He would go the extra kilometer to dump extra sand in my boot or replace my shampoo with hair dye, and so on.

"He was always checking up people - and concealed it. But with youâ€|" David trailed off, a white scar on his jaw gleaming as he turned his head. He met Arthur's eyes. "It's different," David said. "He's different."

Arthur wasn't quite sure how to answer that. He knew the pranks David was talking about. Eames delighted in making Arthur's life a living hell whenever he could. But the concern he showed himâ€| from the second Arthur had stumbled over his doorstep, literally, Eames had been nothing butâ€| helpful? It was a change of pace, that was for sure, and it all happened so quickly. Arthur didn't know how to process it.

"Goodbye, David," Arthur replied finally, clasping the other man's hand in a firm farewell. "Hopefully the next time I see you, it will be from the other side of Colin Jansen's body." Arthur opened the Ford's door, slipping to the ground with a muffled thump.

"I can drink to that." David started up the engine again. Saluting Arthur with his free hand, David drove the car off into the night, the dim headlights quickly fading into the inky darkness.

Arthur stood at the end of the driveway for a minute watching the vehicle disappear. He gazed up at the sky, noticing the grey-black clouds partially blotting out the crescent moon. It will rain soon, Arthur thought, eyes tracing the imposing formations. A perfect time to bury a body.

Shaking off the morbid thought, Arthur began to trudge down the narrow driveway. He heard the sounds of wildlife around him as he made the trek, yet he could see little to nothing in the darkness. Finally, he reached the front door. He took the key Eames had given him, put it in the lock, and twisted. Pushing on the door slightly with his good shoulder, Arthur walked inside. The house was dark, near pitch black. The only light was coming from the kitchen. Craning his neck, Arthur saw a lamp, which he supposed Eames had left on in anticipation for Arthur's return. Just another example of forethought I never thought that man possessed.

Arthur hung the key by its ring onto a coat hook. His ruined shirt crinkled at the movement. Arthur's lip curled up in disgust as he took in his cracked sleeve, stained with dried coffee. He felt the dried blood tightening the fabric on his back. I'll be glad when I can take this horrid thing off. I'd almost prefer a clean paisley

shirt. Almost._

But as Arthur trudged his way up the narrow staircase, all he could think about was getting back under that white quilt. It was nearing morning and Arthur couldn't remember the last time he slept. Sighing, he stumbled his way into the room and flicked the light on by the bed.

Arthur took a die out of his pocket, throwing it over the white of the quilt. At the familiar sight of the three, Arthur felt any remaining energy drain out of him. Barely managing to kick off his dress shoes, Arthur fell back on top of the covers, the hard material of the second loaded die poking into his burning side. _Whatever. Too tired._

And there Arthur fell asleep on top of the covers, tie and all. His hand was in his pocket, clutching the phone that connected him to Eames.

_ "Eames? Eames? Is that you up there?" _

Arthur was caught in an odd dream. It was particularly rare that he dreamt at all, anymore. The excess of Somnacin running through his bloodstream tended inhibit it. And yet, here he was, standing in front of Eva Jansenâ€| _wait, were they floating? _

She was yet another person that knew Arthur by 'Eames'. And here she was, calling so insistently, so _loudly_, her British accent so piercing Arthur wished she would just _shut up already, goddamn it - his whole body hurt so much, _it wasn't fair_, he just wanted to lay here, and she just _kept talking_.

"Eames? Dear, are you in here? Why - "

And then Arthur's dream shattered as Eva let out a blood curling scream.

Arthur's eyes shot open, confused at the unfamiliar ceiling that consumed his vision. _What the - _his head snapped to the side, and _he wasn't alone_, a person was standing in the doorway -

Arthur half rolled, half jumped off the quilt, adrenaline coursing through his system. His back hit the powder blue wall - _oww, fuck_- and he scrambled towards the bedside table.

His fingers closed around the grip of his Glock, and he cocked it towards the threat.

But it wasn't one of Jansen's men in the doorway, ready to kill him.

It wasn't David, checking up on him.

It wasn't even Eames, back to make sure he didn't faint in the shower - again.

Arthur was aiming his Glock at a total stranger, and not an imposing one, at that. She looked mid-sixties, with a tight bun of brown hair, shot through with grey. She wore a checkered dress, travel bag in hand. At the moment, she clutched the bag to her heart, looking

terrified.

"Ah," Arthur stammered, clicking the safety on and setting his Glock onto the middle of the quilt carefully. He put his hands up in the air, placating. Arthur met her eyes, taking in the familiar multi-colored flecks. "You're Eames' mother, I presume?" He asked awkwardly. "I - I don't mean any harm."

"You have me at a disadvantage, young man," she said, sinking slowly onto the quilt, putting the bag next to her. "I'm afraid Eames didn't tell me we would have a visitor."

"It wasâ€| unplanned," Arthur began, hurriedly leaning to grab his gun out of the way of her bag.

"Oh, my," Eames' mother blurted out, springing to her feet. "What happened to your back, dear?"

Arthur sighed. That question is getting old. "It's nothing, just someâ€| stains."

"Nonsense!" She declared, straightening her pearl necklace. She picked up her pouch from the bed. "We are cleaning you up, and then you are coming downstairs to explain all this. I will make tea. My son has not left me totally oblivious to his type of work, you know." She stopped, considering him. "Although - he never brought company home before. Are you his boyfriend?"

Arthur closed his eyes briefly, wishing that the ground would swallow him up. I hope I'm at work and this is a dream. He looked down, finding his die still on the bed, the three facing tauntingly up at him. He sighed, glancing behind him, and noticed the red imprint he had left smeared on the wall. "I'll clean that up," he said apologetically. He remembered the blood staining downstairs as well - the tablecloth, the carpet, the couches. I have a feeling that's not the last time I'll be saying that phrase. Whose idea was it for me to come back here?

"Eames," Arthur sighed out.

End
file.